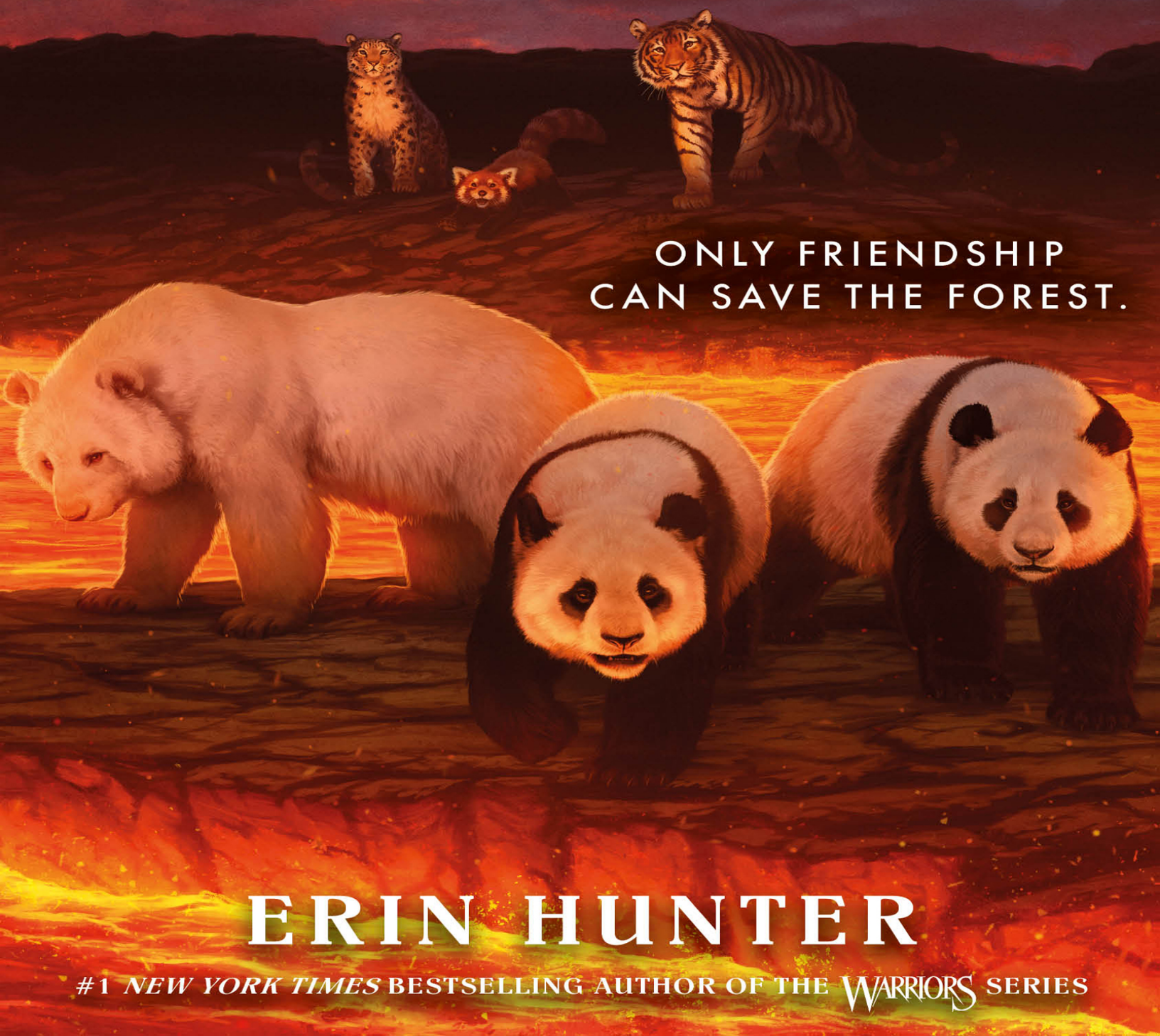
BAMBOO KINGDOM

FIRE AND ASH



ONLY FRIENDSHIP
CAN SAVE THE FOREST.

ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE WARRIORS SERIES

BAMBOO KINGDOM

FIRE AND ASH

ERIN
HUNTER

HARPER
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

For Ben

Special thanks to Rosie Best

Map

BAMBOO KINGDOM
THE WHITE SPINE MOUNTAINS
DRAGON MOUNTAIN
THE ENDLESS MAW
THE NORTHERN FOREST
GRANDFATHER GINKGO
SLENDERWOOD CLEARING
FEAST CLEARING
THE SOUTHERN FOREST

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Prologue

"HURRY!" QUICKTAIL PAUSED, GASPING for breath, looking back at the rest of her band sprinting across the hillside. Goldback, her cousin's mate, had her head down, and baby Duskback clung to her shoulders. Swingtail couldn't stop looking behind him, and poor Flicktail was staggering already, his arms flailing as he tried to keep up with his young niece and nephew.

We were safer in the trees. We should have stayed in the trees. But the monkeys had been frightened when the wolves came, and so they'd run. Now they found themselves on this forsaken ground, with only rocks and scrub and grass. Nowhere to climb, nowhere to hide.

"They're coming!" Swingtail gasped.

I know they are! But Quicktail didn't reply—she couldn't waste the breath.

Behind them, a howl went up from the tree line.

Quicktail peered ahead, but the closest trees were so far away, right at the bottom of the hill. The wolves were on their tails, and all they could do was keep on running.

They hadn't even found the goji bushes that their band had been sent to raid. Brightface, her fellow Strong Arm, had told her that she should take her band and investigate.

They're dripping with fruit, he'd said. *You bring a couple of armfuls back, it'll be an easy win with Brawnshanks. Your troop needs the attention. No, don't wait for Nimbletail—Crookedclaw has sent her on some kind of mission. It's just fruit. Even Swingtail can handle a little fruit. Just promise to save some for me!*

The wolves howled again, and Quicktail's hands ached as she scrambled across the stony hillside. The predators were easily keeping pace with the sprinting monkeys—worse, they were gaining. The sounds of their paws on the stony ground and their panting and snarling seemed to fill the world around her. . . .

And then she saw the bamboo. It had been hidden by the curve of the hillside, but there was a wide, dense expanse just to their right, closer than

the closest trees.

“Bamboo!” she gasped. Swingtail’s and Goldback’s heads turned, and they skidded around to head for the canes. Quicktail dived for Flicktail, grabbed his arm, and yanked him along with her. The wolves howled again, and this time there was anger in their voices.

“No!” the lead wolf yelled. “Stop those monkeys!”

“They won’t get away!” snarled another. Quicktail couldn’t look back. She heard the paw-step noises change and speed up, but she fixed her gaze on the bamboo canes. Swingtail was the first to reach them. He jumped up to cling to one and paused, looking back, waiting for his mate and baby to join him. Duskback clung to Goldback’s shoulders as she took a flying leap, and all three of them vanished into the dense, wavering leaves of the bamboo canopy, making the canes dance as they passed through.

Quicktail took one, two, three long strides and then jumped with all her might, half pulling and half throwing Flicktail along with her, feeling the hot breath of a wolf on her tail as she leaped. They struck the bamboo. Quicktail let go of Flicktail to seize the canes in both hands, and then, as Flicktail scrambled up into the canopy after the rest of their band, she finally looked back.

The wolf who’d been right on her heels snarled and snapped only a few monkey-lengths below her. The cane she was clinging to swayed as he barged into it, furiously trying to bite it down. But he was no panda—his jaws weren’t strong enough to bite through the thick, woody stem. Quicktail climbed higher, watching as the other wolves—six of them, no, seven—ran up to the edge of the bamboo and paced back and forth in front of it, looking up at her with reddened eyes and slavering jaws. But their fur was thin and their paws unsteady. *They’re starving*, Quicktail thought. No wonder they’d given chase the moment they’d scented the monkeys.

“You let them get away!” whined one wolf, snapping at the tail of the one who’d almost caught Quicktail.

“They’re too fast!” the other wolf snarled back.

“I’m so hungry . . . ,” howled another, lying down with her head on her paws.

Their leader stepped up to stand right beneath Quicktail, fixing blazing eyes on hers and saying nothing.

Quicktail shuddered, then sprang deeper into the canopy, hurrying after the rest of her band.

It was a relief to be up in the air, leaping between the creaking and swaying bamboo canes. It didn't take long before the disappointed growls of the wolves faded and she could only hear the soft whistling of the wind in the leaves.

She caught up to Flicktail, and together they lurched through the canes to where Swingtail and Goldback were perched together, catching their breath, with Dustback hanging from a cane beside them.

"Woo!" Swingtail hooted as he saw them emerge from the forest. "We showed them!"

Quicktail gave her cousin an annoyed look. "Barely," she muttered.

"Oh, come on," Swingtail said, pushing out his chest, obviously trying to make himself look big and strong. "We were fine!"

Quicktail just shook her head and pressed on, swinging from cane to cane until the bamboo forest ended just as suddenly as it had begun, and she landed in a pile of soft brown leaves. There was still ash on the ground here from the fire that had consumed part of the Northern Forest. Some of it puffed up in her face as the rest of the band landed beside her, and she coughed and rubbed her eyes.

"Interesting," said a voice.

Quicktail looked up, still blinking away ash. A group of familiar monkeys was standing in front of her: Crookedclaw, Brightface, and the other Strong Arms.

All of them.

"What are you doing here?" Quicktail asked, but even before she reached the end of the sentence, her heart had begun to pound. Something was very wrong—she could read it in the quirk of Crookedclaw's brows and the solemn glares on the faces of the other Strong Arms.

"Brightface?" she said.

Brightface simply blinked at her and then looked away.

"Crookedclaw, you should be careful," said Swingtail, oblivious to the chill in the air. "There are wolves just the other side of this bamboo."

"I know," said Crookedclaw.

Some of the Strong Arms sniggered, and shivers ran up and down Quicktail's back.

Everyone knew—nobody ever spoke about it, but *every* monkey knew—that Crookedclaw used the Strong Arms and her own hand-picked spies to deal with monkeys who she thought had become a threat to

Brawnshanks, or to the troop. Quicktail had never been called to do this, but she'd been a Strong Arm for long enough that she could smell a threat when it was right in front of her nose.

But what did we *do? What could any of us have done to get the whole troop in trouble?*

Crookedclaw waved a hand. The other Strong Arms advanced, and Quicktail backed up, gripping the bamboo cane with one hand, thinking about swinging away from here. . . . But even if they could outrun the Strong Arms through the bamboo canopy, there was nowhere to go except back into the jaws of the wolves.

"Crookedclaw," she said, half choking on her words. "I'm a loyal Strong Arm—what's going on?"

"There never were any goji bushes, were there?" Goldback said. "This is a trap."

Strong Arms grabbed Quicktail's arms, seized Swingtail by the throat, and grabbed on to Goldback's tail. They tore Dustback from her arms, and he screamed and clawed weakly at them.

"What have we done? We deserve an explanation," Flicktail squeaked, stamping his foot on the ashy ground as Brightface grabbed on to the back of his neck.

"Oh, it's not what *you've* done."

Quicktail stopped struggling, her bruised arms going limp in the other monkey's grip.

"Nimbletail," she whispered.

"Your sister knew the price," said Crookedclaw. "I warned her what would happen to her band if I found out she'd been helping the Dragon Speakers, and she did it anyway." The older monkey leaned in and put a fake-sympathetic hand on Quicktail's shoulder. "It must hurt to know that she cared more about three stupid pandas than her own family."

Quicktail lunged for Crookedclaw, aiming her sharp teeth at her arm. Crookedclaw recoiled just in time. The Strong Arms tugged on Quicktail again, shoving her to her knees, but Quicktail held Crookedclaw's gaze the whole time.

"Nimbletail's no traitor," she said. "Whatever she did, she did it for the good of the kingdom. It's *you* and Brawnshanks who are the real traitors!"

"Quicktail, shut up!" hissed Swingtail. "You're making it worse."

Crookedclaw brushed down her fur. "Take them away."

Fury burned in Quicktail’s heart. But as Crookedclaw turned and walked away, and her bandmates were dragged from her with the Strong Arms’ hands over their mouths, her fury turned to cold terror.

Where are they taking us? Will I ever see Nimbletail again?

Chapter One

"THERE HE IS!"

Rain stumbled over her paws as Ghost shouldered her and hissed urgently in her ear. He nudged her down into a patch of ferns, and she blinked away the dew sprinkling her face and peered up the slope ahead of them. Between the thin trunks of the ginkgo trees and the jutting, moss-covered rocks she could see the shape of a round black-and-white creature.

Lychee.

Rain's heart gave a jolt of hurt and anger as she watched her almost mate climbing the hill in front of them.

Rain and Ghost had been trekking through the Northern Forest for several days, cautiously following in the tracks of the traitorous Lychee as he carried her stolen Dragon Speaker stone into the grasping paws of her enemy. And now he was right here.

There was no sign of the stone.

"What do you want to do?" Ghost whispered.

Rain considered for a moment. "Ambush," she muttered back. "He can't take us both. And then . . . I have a plan. Well, the beginnings of a plan. Let's see what happens."

Ghost nodded, and began to peel away from her, treading through the undergrowth with the stealthy movements he had learned from the snow leopards who'd taken him in as a cub and raised him like their own. Rain knew she couldn't match him for quiet, but she tried anyway, her eyes fixed on the figure of Lychee as she veered around a large rock and began to gain on him.

She moved from bush to stone, hiding behind stands of bamboo and once dropping to her belly and flattening herself when she thought she saw him turn. But soon she was within leaping distance of Lychee, and a flash of white fur in the bushes told her that Ghost was almost upon him too. She waited until Lychee passed behind a tree, and then she jumped, pounding across the last panda-length and around the tree to slam right into him, face-first.

His yelp of surprise and horror was beautiful to Rain's ears. They tumbled over and over in the leaves, sliding down the slope, Lychee scrambling to get a paw hold on the ground while Rain sank her teeth into his ear and dragged him down again.

"You're alive?" Lychee gasped. "How—I thought—get *off*!" He shook his head hard, and Rain's grip loosened. Lychee reared back, one paw raised to strike her face, and then his ear was torn from her grip as Ghost crashed into them, knocking Lychee down and pinning him to the ground.

"You thought you'd killed her?" he snarled into Lychee's bleeding ear. "It'd take more than a pathetic traitor like you to kill my sister."

"Where's my stone, you waste of fur?" Rain growled.

"Brawnshanks," groaned Lychee.

"As if murdering Pebble and trying to frame me for it weren't enough," snapped Ghost. "I ought to tear your throat out right here!" Lychee's eyes went wide, and his chest started to hitch with panicked breaths.

"No, wait!" he said. "Wait, I'm sorry!"

"You're *sorry*?" echoed Rain. She snorted. Did he really think that *sorry* would be worth anything to her?

"You—you were right about Brawnshanks!" Lychee stammered. "He tricked me. He has no intention of honoring his promise."

Rain rolled her eyes. "His promise to make you ruler over all the pandas? He broke that promise? *Really?* I would never, ever have guessed that the cunning, power-hungry monkey would not follow through on a promise he had no way of actually delivering anyway. . . ."

"All right," Lychee muttered. "All right. I was a fool to trust him. I see that now. But now we're on the same side, right? We both hate Brawnshanks. I can help you get rid of him!"

"You must think we're as stupid as you are," Ghost snarled.

"Rain," Lychee began, pleading in his voice. "I mean it, please—"

"We're giving you one chance to redeem yourself," Rain said. "We're going to need your complete and total cooperation. Tell me, Lychee: Where have you been sleeping?"

Lychee led them to a sheltered hillside, where a broken pile of twigs and bamboo leaves was scattered in the lee of a large rock. Rain sniffed it, and sure enough it smelled of Lychee, stronger even than he did himself.

She took a deep breath and cast a look at Ghost, whose eyes had not left Lychee the whole way. Then she lay down in Lychee's nest and started to roll over and over, covering herself in his scent. She worked her claws into the underlayer of moss and rubbed behind her ears, thrust her muzzle into the leaves, and lay on her belly and wriggled.

She couldn't help shuddering, even though the look on Lychee's face was hilarious—once she might have thought they would share a nest for real, and now here she was doing some kind of horrible pretend version of that.

She got up and stepped close to Ghost.

"What do you think?" she asked.

He sniffed her. "You know," he said, "it's possible this actually might work. What are you going to do about the eye markings?"

"I thought I'd follow his example," Rain said. "You make sure he doesn't run for it."

Ghost nodded, his white brows rising, and sat down with a thump right beside Lychee, who leaned away but didn't run.

Whole swaths of the Northern Forest had gone up in flames only a few days ago, so it wasn't hard to find a tree with a charred, blackened trunk. Rain swiped at the burned bark until it came off, and then gingerly began to rub her paws over her eyes. The hard part wasn't making her eye markings bigger—she just dragged the black substance down her face to mimic Lychee's distinctive coloration—it was making sure that she didn't get the stuff *all* over her face. She turned around and walked back to Ghost and Lychee, imitating Lychee's arrogant swagger. It helped, feeling like she could mock him a little with all this—better than admitting that his scent and his eye markings and his swagger had all been terribly attractive to her just a few days ago.

Lychee's jaw went slack with surprise. Ghost's expression was more thoughtful.

"Honestly, if I didn't come too close, I think I'd buy it," he said.

"As long as I keep redoing my face, and the scent doesn't wear off too fast," Rain said, putting on her best impression of Lychee's voice. She walked up to Lychee himself and stared him down.

"It's pretty uncanny," he said, and he sounded genuine. "Plus, a lot of the monkeys can't tell us apart very well. Sometimes when I went into the

Broken Forest, they'd act like I was just some panda who'd wandered onto their territory."

"Good," said Rain. "Then it's settled."

"What should I do while you're being me?" Lychee asked.

"You'll stay with me," growled Ghost. "You don't leave my sight, you don't answer back, and you don't try to run, and then *maybe* we'll let you go—*if* Rain gets her stone back."

Lychee sighed, but he didn't argue.

Rain rolled a few more times in the nest, making sure not to smudge the black around her eyes. Ghost gave her a final check-over, then moved forward as if to press his face to hers, but thought better of it.

"Let's not get your scent on me too," Rain said. "I'll be back as soon as I can, I promise."

"Good luck," Ghost said.

Rain nodded, and without looking at Lychee, she headed toward the Broken Forest.

By the time she got there, she had practiced Lychee's way of walking both uphill and downhill, and she thought she was getting really good at it. Her main worry was the scent—right now the smell of Lychee was all over her, and hopefully it would mask her own scent enough to confuse a monkey—but what would happen when it wore off? She could return to the nest if she had to, but she didn't want to.

I'm going to take my stone back from Brawnshanks, she thought. *And then it doesn't matter if they figure it out or not—I'll be gone. . . .*

The Broken Forest was a strange place. As she passed between the splintered trees, Rain realized that this patch of broken and scorched earth reminded her of the part of the Northern Forest that had burned—only somehow worse, as if it had never recovered but had burned over and over again, over the course of years. There was a strange smell, too, beyond the scent of Lychee in her fur and the occasional whiff of monkey. The smell grew stronger as she walked deeper into the territory: a sort of foul, burning stink. Part of Rain was glad of it—it would make her own scent harder for anyone to notice—but another part of her was deeply reluctant to go any closer to whatever the source of it could be.

"Hey," said a voice from above her. "You, panda! What are you doing back here?"

Six golden bodies swung down from the trees and landed on low branches and in the ashy ground all around her. Rain recognized a few of them: they were Strong Arms, members of Brawnshanks's elite band of thugs. One older female monkey lowered herself to the ground slowly, and Rain knew her by name: This was Crookedclaw, Brawnshanks's second-in-command, the monkey who had given Nimbletail her orders to spy on Rain.

Rain reminded herself that she was Lychee, and arranged her expression into one she hoped was appropriately arrogant.

"I've got a proposition for Brawnshanks," she said. Crookedclaw's eyes narrowed, and Rain's heart beat faster. Had the old monkey seen through her disguise? This fast?

"Let me guess," Crookedclaw said slowly. "You're going to beg him to change his mind and make you 'king of all the pandas' after all?" The Strong Arms around her sniggered. Rain tried not to react, though part of her almost warmed to Crookedclaw's sarcasm.

Yes! she thought. *It was a stupid promise, and Lychee was stupid to believe it!*

"Anyway, Brawnshanks is busy," said Crookedclaw. "So if you'll take my advice, you—"

And then she was cut off as a bang, as loud as the rumble of an earthquake but much more sudden and startling, rang through the air and rattled the trees all around them. One of the Strong Arms dropped from their branch with a frightened squeak.

Crookedclaw gave Rain a look of annoyance and then pointed toward the source of the noise. "Strong Arms, go!" The monkeys took off, Crookedclaw with them, running through the broken trees.

Rain hesitated. She could let them go, but she was just as curious as they were about what had made that noise—and if she was looking for Brawnshanks and her stone, she would likely find them if she just followed Crookedclaw. So she set off toward the sound, trying to run the way Lychee would.

The acrid smell grew stronger as she ran, and she saw wisps of smoke between the trees. Maybe she was wrong and it *was* another fire, just burning something that gave off this awful stench?

But then she burst from the tree line to see the heart of the Broken Forest opening up ahead of her. Cracked stones jutted up from the ground, with one large, blackened tree lying at an angle across them, and up on top

of that Brawnshanks was leaping from foot to foot, waving his arms. Rain couldn't tell if he was triumphant or furious.

"More!" he yelled. "Again!"

"But Brawnshanks," said another monkey, cowering at the foot of the tree and clutching her tail in her front paws, "the fire didn't like it. . . ."

"Did I say it *should*?" the monkey leader shouted back. "This is the prophecy! That little red panda heard it from the Dragon's own mouth. More water!"

Rain didn't understand what was going on, or why this command made the monkey at Brawnshanks's feet flinch, but other monkeys were running into tunnel openings in the cracked rock, carrying leaves with pools of rainwater collected in them.

Crookedclaw swung up beside Brawnshanks and spoke to him in a low voice that Rain couldn't hear, but Brawnshanks seemed to ignore her.

A moment later another loud bang shook the forest. Rain hunched down low to the ground as flakes of blackened bark fell from the trunks of the trees. The monkeys burst from the tunnel entrances, hooting and howling. Some of them were obviously in pain, limping and patting at their fur, while others tumbled over and over in what seemed like hysterical laughter.

"It goes bang!" one of the hysterical monkeys called up to Brawnshanks. "It doesn't like the water, that's for sure!"

"Grabfinger is dead," said one of the others. He wasn't laughing—his eyes were wide and glassy, as if he knew he had seen something that he'd be seeing again in his nightmares. "He got too close. The fire swallowed him. . . ."

"Brawnshanks, look," said Crookedclaw, pointing down at the cracks in the earth. Rain followed her pointing finger and jumped to her paws as she saw the fiery glow, a swelling liquid flame filling the deepest crevices, rising fast. It was only a small trickle, but there was something so completely *wrong* about seeing fire—or was it water, or maybe rock?—behaving this way. More of the acrid stench was coming out of the hole too, starting to make Rain's head ache. Her paws shook with the urge to run for her life, but she hesitated, looking to Brawnshanks and Crookedclaw, wondering what the two bad monkeys would do now.

Brawnshanks raised his hands over his head and let out a wild laugh, and Rain saw that he was clutching a stone in each paw. One was black and the other a deep, sparkling blue—the blue of her beloved river. . . .

Her heart gave a jolt. *My stone!* She wondered if she could tackle Brawnshanks and get it back right now—but she was too slow. He and Crookedclaw both leaped from the tree, scampered into the forest, and were gone, leaving Rain and the rest of the monkeys standing around the growing rivulet of burning rock. With a gurgle, it spat out foul steam and began to carve a thin, terrible path into the forest floor.

The monkeys scattered, and Rain turned and ran with them.

Chapter Two

SHIVER CRESTED THE HILL, her large paws easily picking a route between the rocks, and found herself at the top of a high ridge with the cold wind from the mountain ruffling the long fur on her ears and her tail. She took a deep breath, scenting the breeze for any hint that the golden monkeys were on their trail.

There was no sign of them, but there was something odd on the air, something Shiver felt was familiar but couldn't place. It smelled kind of off-putting, but not like rotting meat or another snow leopard's territory markings. It smelled more like hot, bad . . . rocks? Shiver opened her mouth and her upper lip twitched as she sniffed again.

"Can you smell that?" she said, turning as her littermates padded up behind her.

"Yes," said her sister, Snowstorm. "What is it?"

"Does it smell a bit like the smoke from the Dragon Mountain to you?" their brother Frost asked.

Shiver sniffed again. She was just trying to decide whether he was right when a small voice spoke up from beside her paws.

"The sacred vent," said the little pangolin. "It's just ahead. The sacred steam smells like this sometimes! It's strong today."

Shiver looked back at the group of pangolins who the snow-leopard littermates had been escorting back to their home. They'd been imprisoned by the golden monkeys, and then . . . well, something Shiver didn't quite understand had happened: There had been a storm and a huge fire, and Ghost's Dragon Speaker stone had shone the way in the smoke, while Leaf's stone had somehow hidden the pangolins and Dasher, the red panda, from the searching monkeys.

The pangolins gathered around the snow leopards' paws and climbed up onto small rocks, looking out over the forest, their claws clicking as they clasped their front feet in front of their chests.

"We're almost home," said the one whose name was Swirling Storm.

“Will you be safe there?” Snowstorm asked. “We don’t want to leave you where the monkeys can just come and capture you again.”

Some of the pangolins nodded, but others looked very worried, narrowing their small round eyes and clacking their claws together nervously. It was rare for them to disagree and Shiver found it a little unnerving.

“Perhaps we’ll stay a little while,” said Snowstorm, her ears flicking as she picked up on their hesitation. “Just in case.”

They made their way down the slope, making slow progress with the pangolins leading up ahead. Eventually they reached the open clearing with the wide rock shelf running across it. The smell was stronger here, and Shiver could see streams of white vapor rising from small holes in the rock. The sacred vents, presumably.

“The vents will tell us how to reunite the Great Dragon,” said Swirling Storm confidently. He began to clamber up onto the rocks—and then there was a rumble beneath the earth, like a sharp and sudden earthquake. All the creatures instinctively froze and then crouched as the ground gave a lurch. But it didn’t continue to shake—instead there was a bang, and a huge plume of smoke billowed out of the rocks, filling the clearing and sending shards of stone and dust falling all around them.

Snowstorm curled her body around Circling Breeze and Spiral Moon, using her thick fur to shelter them from the falling debris.

“Help!” cried Swirling Storm, and Shiver looked up in time to see him struggling to keep from slipping into a hole in the ground, his long claws scraping the rock for purchase. Shiver leaped, and in a panic she closed her jaws as gently as she could over Swirling Storm’s small, leathery head. Her heart stuttering in her chest, Shiver slowly and carefully backed away from the hole in the ground, carrying the pangolin as if he were a tiny leopard cub. She set Swirling Storm down and licked him once, hoping she hadn’t hurt him. Swirling Storm looked up, and there was shock and terror in his beady black eyes, but he didn’t seem to be in pain.

A moment later there was no more shaking earth, no more falling rock. Shiver looked up and saw the great plume of smoke rising into the sky all in one enormous cloud, like a stray ball of fluff that had detached from a leopard cub’s fur and rolled away across the mountainside. The wind picked it apart, and it gently streamed away into wisps of smoke and vanished.

“Thank you, Shiver,” Swirling Storm gasped. “But what happened to the vent?”

The pangolins began to let out shocked, keening cries as they gingerly emerged from behind the leopards, crawled up over the scattered rocks, and saw that the stony plateau in the middle of the clearing was . . . gone. The small cracks that had let the steam out into the air had torn open like a prey creature’s belly under the teeth of a tiger, revealing a jagged drop into darkness.

“What does it mean?” Spiral Moon asked. He tiptoed to the edge of the hole. Shiver wanted to pounce and stop him, but she was afraid of knocking him into the hole. Spiral Moon looked down and shuddered, then hurried back to the others. “The vent is gone.”

“No steam,” said another pangolin. “No Dragon!”

“Why would the Dragon destroy the vent?” asked Circling Breeze, scratching at the ground anxiously.

“Maybe it didn’t,” said Swirling Storm, chewing on a claw in thought. “The monkeys put us in those caves, deep beneath, where the burning river was. What if the vent just fell in?”

“Or Brawnshanks is doing something down there,” Shiver muttered. She looked to her older siblings, but both of them seemed a little lost about all of this.

“What will you do now?” Snowstorm asked Circling Breeze.

The pangolins said nothing for a moment, then formed a tight circle with their long noses pointed in. They didn’t speak, but looked at each other, almost as if they could read each other’s thoughts.

They can’t actually do that, though. Can they?

“The other vent,” said Spiral Moon at last, and the pangolins all nodded together.

Circling Breeze turned around and looked up at the leopards.

“We know of another sacred place,” she said. “The steam there may have answers for us. We must go, to find out how we can save the Great Dragon.”

“Will you come with us?” asked Swirling Storm. “It will take . . .” He looked back at the others, who shuffled their little feet and tilted their heads in thought.

“Three days,” said Spiral Moon, and the others all echoed him.

“Three days. Three.”

Shiver let out a long breath. Who knew what Brawnshanks could get up to in that time?

“We’d better get moving, then,” she said. She turned to her littermates. “I’m going with them. I need to help Ghost, and I think this is the best way.”

“Well, let’s go, then,” said Frost. “Someone’s got to get to the bottom of all this trouble with the Great Dragon, right? I don’t really understand it, but I know it’s important.”

“Right,” agreed Snowstorm. “If Brawnshanks *did* do this . . .” She glanced down at the hole in the ground and shuddered. “We all have a responsibility to stop him before it gets any worse. Lead the way,” she said to the pangolins, and after a little discussion they pointed in the direction of the sun and set off on their waddling legs. The three snow leopards followed, Shiver pausing to give one more look at the deep chasm that had opened up in the Northern Forest.

Three days, she thought. *Hold on, Ghost. I just hope we’re not already too late.*

Chapter Three

THE GREEN DRAGON SPEAKER stone was as smooth as water, as cool as ice, gleaming like the first light of the sun through the canopy of the ginkgo trees in spring. Leaf's whole world was dark, except for the shine from the stone's surface. The weight of it in her paw felt like the weight of the Bamboo Kingdom in its entirety.

She felt as if she'd fallen from a great height, or been crushed beneath a huge boulder. Every part of her ached. Darkness hung over her head, and she cringed away from it, certain that if it ever enveloped her she would be lost forever.

I failed, she thought. *The Great Dragon tested me, and I failed.*

She might have thought she was dead, or dying, except that through the darkness she could occasionally see glimpses of things she was sure were real. The mouth of a cave, the faint moving shapes of trees beyond. She could hear voices.

"She was born here?" said one, so familiar it made Leaf's heart soar for a moment, before she tired again and drifted back into the darkness.

"Orchid was . . . Shadowhunter . . ."

The voice was unfamiliar, but there was something about it that sparked Leaf's memory. Shadowhunter. *Tiger.*

". . . get better though, won't she?" said the voice of her best friend. And then: ". . . must be something . . . to help her. . . ."

You're here, she thought. She tried to form the words aloud, but they slipped away from her. *You brought the Dragon to me. . . . You are helping. . . .*

The world narrowed back to just Leaf, and the gleam of the Dragon Speaker stone in her paw, and the dark presence floating over her head.

She knew she was slipping into a dream, because the images she was beginning to see were sharp and clear and made no sense. She was still in a dark place, a cavern or tunnel, but this wasn't like the green, damp cave by the river where the tiger and Dasher were watching over her; this one was black stone and brown dust, with a strange red light from below. She was

standing on a high ledge, looking down and down toward a strange scene beneath her.

At the bottom of the cavern, a river of molten, burning red rock was seething, throwing up sparks and puffs of foul smoke. On other rock shelves around the edge of the cavern, golden-furred creatures jostled for space, leaning over the edge to see and then recoiling as the heat from below struck them in their flat blue faces. There were pangolins on one ledge, and Leaf could feel their terror as they were urged toward the burning river. . . .

And then the Dragon was there, rising from the river, as huge and glorious as she remembered it from the Dragon Mountain, its red-gold scales reflecting the light of the molten rock. It roared at the monkeys, and began to twitch and convulse as the pangolins were split apart. Leaf didn't understand what she was seeing—a dragon made entirely of light peeled away from the form, and then so did a dragon made of darkness, leaving only a dragon made of a shifting and beautiful rainbow.

The Dark Dragon turned its head and looked right at Leaf.

Her heart gave a lurch and she tried to back away, but with the speed of a dream the dragon was upon her, sweeping her up into its huge form. She struggled weakly, uncertain if it had her in its claws or its coils or its huge jaws. She saw gleaming black scales and felt the brush of long, soft black fur across her face, and she felt herself being lifted and carried away.

The cavern disappeared, and instead she saw a dark hillside, the Dark Sun in the sky sending out its halo of strange and horrible light. A panda stood at the top of the hill, shaking.

It's me, Leaf thought. *I'm about to give up the stone and try to leave the kingdom. . . .*

She could feel guilt, the same guilt that had driven her then, weighing her down. The guilt for not being able to save the red pandas from the snow leopards or the pangolins from Brawnshanks, for not being there to stop Ghost being rejected by Rain, for not being able to stop the Dark Sun . . . and now, too, the guilt for having tried to give up. She had done her best at every turn, and it simply hadn't been enough. She felt as if rocks had been tied to her paws, dragging her down.

But the Dark Dragon lifted her as if she weighed less than a feather, and time moved on, and she saw the rain come and the stone roll down from the rock where she had left it . . . and land in a puddle beside a bedraggled

young red panda. Dasher picked up the stone, and the weight of her guilt lifted, just a little bit.

Images came faster, glimpses between the dark coils of the Dragon as it sped with her across the kingdom. Blood dripping from limp red-panda bodies in the jaws of snow leopards . . . pangolins holding their claws in front of their chests as they tried to tell her their wisdom . . .

There was a forest on fire, and a white panda running into the flames. The weight on her heart lifted a little more as she watched Ghost use all his strength to tip over a tree and rescue a group of doomed creatures from the other side of a valley. Then she found herself flying through thick gold and green leaves and looking down at a waterfall, where Rain was sitting with Lychee, their shoulders almost touching . . . but she knew at once that this was no romantic meeting. Sure enough, they began to fight each other. The images seemed to flicker and stutter as Leaf's heart sped up, watching her sister fight off the other panda—but then Lychee was gone, and Rain lay still in the waterfall, and Ghost was sprinting up the hill toward her. . . .

The Dark Dragon closed its coils around her, and she pressed her forehead to its cool scales, her heart beating fast.

"They need me," she muttered, her words coming out slurred and slow. "I never should have given up. I have to go. Have to get to Rain and Ghost. . . ."

"Leaf, it's all right," said Dasher's voice. She felt small paws on her shoulder and opened her eyes into the real world. Everything was blurred and strange, but Dasher was in front of her, standing on his back paws and leaning on her. She was on her feet, but not for long—she tried to take a step forward, but her paws were so heavy she tripped over them and sank back to the cave floor in a panting heap.

"Dash," she whispered. "Got to go, got to get to Rain. . . ."

"We're going," said Dasher. "But you can't walk anywhere. Here, can you crawl?"

He led her, nudging her with his little nose and his soft paws, to something warm and furry.

"Climb aboard," said the tiger.

Leaf was so tired she could barely move, but she managed to drape herself over the tiger's back. With a grunt of effort the tiger got to her paws, and Leaf felt herself lifted off the ground.

"Can you really carry her all the way, Nightwalker?" Dasher asked.

“I can carry her as far as I can carry her,” the tiger responded. “After that, we will do something else.”

“All right,” said Dasher. “Well, the Healing Hearts should be back in either Hollowtree or Slenderwood, and neither of them is *that* far from here. We’ll make it.”

“We’ll do what we can,” said Nightwalker. She was a different tiger, younger, but she had something of Shadowhunter’s mysterious but practical way about her.

Nightwalker began to move, and Leaf pressed her nose to the tiger’s fur, clutching the Dragon Speaker stone in one paw and trying her best not to be heavy. The Dark Dragon swirled above her head, moving with her, watching, but she was less afraid of it now. Perhaps it wouldn’t eat her whole after all.

She squinted under heavy lids at Dasher as he trotted beside Nightwalker, pushing through a small patch of flowers as they stepped out of the cave.

“Runner Healing Heart will be able to help you,” he said to her. “It’s not far. We’ll be there soon, and he’ll make you all better again. You’ll see.”

What Leaf saw was something quite different. Dasher’s tone of voice was light and optimistic, with barely a shake in it. But the stone in her paw felt cold, and when he turned to look at her, there was a blank darkness over his face, as if he had walked into deep shadow.

Leaf knew what it meant. The Dark Dragon whispered it silently into her heart.

Dasher was telling her that it was going to be all right, and he was lying.

Chapter Four

"DID YOU SEE IT?" the young monkey asked his friends, dangling upside down from a branch above Rain's head. "The lava jumped up into the sky, taller than this tree!"

"I heard that Jitterpaws barely got out with her life," said another.

"You can still see it now," said a third. "If you're brave enough to go up to Brawnshanks's tree, that is."

Rain listened to them with half an ear as she made her way through the forest. Brawnshanks's tree was exactly where she was going, though it felt like a terrible mistake in more ways than one. Some of the young monkeys were exaggerating—if the lava had really flown so far into the air, she suspected a lot more monkeys than just poor Grabfinger would have perished. She had run as hard and fast as she could, and so had the other monkeys who'd been there when the little rivulets of fire had spread out from the great crack in the ground, and by the time she'd felt safe to stop running, her throat was burning from inhaling all the horrible-smelling smoke.

The monkeys had finally stopped throwing water onto the burning river they called "lava," so it had calmed a little, but as she carefully picked her way through the trees, she heard monkeys hooting, and she looked down a slope to see a group of them throwing leaves and nuts into a thin stream of steaming rock that wound along the bottom of a valley. Fire burst from the surface every time it touched a plant or a patch of dirt, and the monkeys whooped and leaped away. They were laughing, but with an edge of hysteria.

At least in all this confusion, and with the Broken Forest full of the strange and acrid smell of the lava, not a single monkey had questioned *Lychee*'s presence among them—the scent of his nest, the walk, the voice, and the eye markings seemed to be enough to convince the distracted monkeys.

Would it be enough to convince Brawnshanks himself? If not, maybe she could *confuse* him into letting go of the stones?

One of them was a fake, that much she was sure of. Lychee had given Brawnshanks *her* real stone, but Ghost had passed on Dasher's story of tricking the monkeys into accepting an ordinary stone in place of Leaf's. Rain had laughed until she'd felt sick. It seemed a little less funny now that she'd seen what Brawnshanks was willing to do in pursuit of the fake prophecy Dasher had fed him. But it was still quite funny.

So all she had to do was get back the one real stone: the blue stone, *her* stone. That would only be half as difficult. Right?

The best way, she'd already decided, would be to try to get him on his own and off his guard. One monkey was no match for a panda, no matter how unhinged the monkey was. He was rarely alone during the day, and at night she suspected it'd be hard for a panda to sneak up on him.

She had to get close to him *legitimately*.

At last she came across some Strong Arms who were huddled around the trunk of a tree, digging at some mushrooms that had grown between the roots. She rolled her shoulders and put on her most Lychee-ish walk as she strolled up to them.

"Need help?" she asked in a deep voice.

The Strong Arms looked up at her, and one of them chuckled.

"Not from you," she said.

Rain sniffed. "All right, then. Keep going." She flopped down on her backside and began to casually dig up huge clumps of earth with her large claws. The monkeys looked at their small fingers and the mushrooms they were struggling to tear up from the roots, and one of them rolled his eyes.

"Fine, if you're desperate to do our job for us," he said. "I suppose you'd like to bring these to Brawnshanks personally, too. Still hoping he'll reward you for your loyalty—or is it just that the pandas wouldn't have you back after you betrayed them?"

Rain tried to look like she was trying not to look angry. "Listen, I just want to make sure I'm on the right side when the Dragon's destroyed for good and Brawnshanks rules the kingdom," she said. "Just like you are."

One of the monkeys hissed at her, but the one who'd called her on her—well, Lychee's—motives actually laughed.

"I'll remind Crookedclaw that you're looking to prove your worth," he said. "You might regret it."

I think Brawnshanks might regret it, Rain thought.

She dug up the remaining mushrooms and the monkeys scampered off with them, giggling.

But to Rain's surprise, it seemed as if the Strong Arm had followed through on his promise, because it was only two feasts later, during the Feast of Long Light, that she heard a rustling and saw Briskhand climbing down a tree trunk toward her.

"We hear you're keen to make yourself useful," he said, not waiting for Rain to finish her mouthful of bamboo.

Rain swallowed quickly and adopted the most Lychee-ish expression she could. "I know which way the wind is blowing," she said. "I saw Brawnshanks's control over the burning rock. I'm still angry about his promise, but you'd have to be stupid not to want to be on his side when it's all over."

"Too right," muttered Briskhand. "Crookedclaw said to tell you there might be a job for you after all. Go to the big rock that looks like a giant half-peeled nut. You do know where that is, don't you?"

Is this a test? Does he know that Lychee knew this place? What would Lychee say?

Rain's heart thumped hard for a moment, before she realized—Lychee probably wouldn't admit to not knowing, even if he was wrong.

"Course I do," she said. "Near the fallen tree, where Brawnshanks gives his speeches. Where the lava burst out."

Briskhand laughed, but at least he didn't start yelling for help dealing with an intruder.

"I wouldn't go there," he said. "Unless you're *really* keen to die for our cause."

Interesting, Rain thought.

"On the north side of the Broken Forest," Briskhand went on. "You can't miss it. He'll meet you there."

"Brawnshanks himself?" Rain couldn't stop her eyebrows shooting up.

"You did say you wanted to be of use to him," said Briskhand. "You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

Rain shook her head. "Not at all. Glad he's willing to give me another chance. Now?"

"Now," confirmed the monkey.

Brawnshanks was not alone on the big rock that looked like a nut.

It did look like one, Rain had to admit: A sort of outer shell of one kind of rock seemed to have cracked to reveal a smoother black stone underneath. And Brawnshanks was sitting on it almost as if he'd been hatched from the nut stone like a baby crane from an egg. Other monkeys had gathered all around, and they were sitting and watching him, or chewing on bits of food, or arguing among themselves, obviously waiting for something. It was a disappointment that she wouldn't be able to pin Brawnshanks to the ground and take the stone back right now, but Rain held her head high as she approached. The closer she could get to Brawnshanks, the more chances she'd have. She just had to be patient. . . .

Brawnshanks looked down and saw Rain, and she held her breath to see if he recognized her beneath her Lychee disguise, but if he did, he didn't show it—he crooked a long finger at her, and she made her way to the foot of the rock and looked up at him.

"Briskhand told me you had a job for me," she said, in her deep and raspy Lychee impression.

"I've been thinking about your reward," Brawnshanks said. He was passing something from hand to hand as he spoke, and Rain realized with a jolt that it was her Dragon Speaker stone, its surface blue and shimmering in his golden-furred hands. She was almost overwhelmed with longing and anger, but she forced herself to look at his face and concentrate on what he was saying. "Now, I can't deliver you the loyalty of the pandas, but I can give you part of the Southern Forest to run. The hill they gather on . . . what's their stupid name for it? The feast clearing. And the hills around it. I can give you that, once I'm done here."

"Why would I believe you?" Rain scoffed. "You already took your promise back once."

She regretted saying it at once—Lychee had apparently been a credulous idiot around Brawnshanks, or he would never have agreed to the first deal at all, and she'd just used Lychee's voice to say something distinctly Rain-y. But Brawnshanks didn't seem to have noticed.

"Because the price has gone up," he sneered. "This time, if you do as I tell you, you will actually have earned it."

Getting the stone wasn't enough to earn a reward, Rain thought. *Tricking a Dragon Speaker into taking me—him—into her—I mean my—confidence . . . none of that was enough, so what could I do for you now that would make you honor your promise?*

She didn’t say any of that, though.

“Just tell me what you need,” she said instead.

“Kill Ghost,” Brawnshanks said. “He is alive, despite our plotting. The snow leopards failed me. You won’t fail me, will you, Lychee?”

“No,” said Rain.

“We require proof,” said another voice at Rain’s ear, and she jumped as she realized that Crookedclaw was standing right behind her.

She must *have been able to smell me from that close,* Rain thought, half panicking. *Do I still smell of Lychee? What if she knows?*

“Bring us proof of the white panda’s death,” Crookedclaw said. “We don’t want you playing any little tricks on us, do we?”

“I wouldn’t,” Rain said, in her lowest and most Lychee-sounding voice.

“No, of course not,” said Crookedclaw, narrowing her eyes.

Oh, Dragon. Does she know? Is she suspicious of me . . . or is she just a suspicious monkey?

And more than that, how in the Nine Feasts can I fake Ghost’s death well enough to convince her?

Brawnshanks had stopped paying attention to her or to Crookedclaw, and was rising up on his legs, holding his arms above his head. In each fist, Rain could see he clutched a stone—one glittering blue, the other a dull black.

“Friends,” he hooted. “Attend to me! You are about to witness something truly incredible!”

That got all the monkeys’ attention, even the ones who were fighting with each other—at least one pair of monkeys froze mid-wrestle.

Nine Feasts, what is he about to say? Rain thought. *Last time he had an incredible idea, he cracked the very earth. . . .*

“I have had a vision,” said Brawnshanks. He brought both stones down to hold them cradled in front of him. “The Dragon of darkness and the mysterious third Dragon have spoken to me in my dreams, and I have wonderful news. I have seen my own future. It wears scales and claws, and it has a tail and a cunning mind. I know what I must do to achieve my dreams. They have begged me not to do it, but I have devised a way to be done with them once and for all. A new era rises! The era of the Dragon Monkey!”

There was a hushed silence, which went on just a little bit too long. Rain cast a glance at the assembled monkeys and saw that many of them

were looking at each other as if wondering if they'd all heard the same speech; others were staring at Brawnshanks and scratching their heads.

Rain's spirits lifted, just a little.

They all think that was as jumbled and crazy as I do! she thought.

But then Crookedclaw let out a whoop of encouragement and slapped her hands on the ground, and within moments all the other monkeys had followed suit—even before Crookedclaw had turned to glare at them, which she did, and Rain wouldn't have wanted to be a monkey who was caught *not* cheering in that moment. She even raised her head to the sky and forced a celebratory growl.

Brawnshanks didn't seem to have noticed this hesitation, or perhaps he simply didn't care anymore. He raised both stones to his face and pressed them against his cheeks as if he could absorb their power through his skin. The black one left a faint trace of ash on his blue face.

"Witness me, as I absorb the power of the Dragon!" he cried, and then he opened his mouth. . . .

No! Rain wanted to cry out but she swallowed the word before it could fly out of her mouth and give her away. It was too late anyway. Brawnshanks had swallowed both stones. He held his hands over his mouth for a moment, throwing his head back, his neck and shoulders convulsing. Horror wriggled underneath Rain's fur. The monkeys cried out again, some of them in shock and dismay, some in wild laughter, others carrying on the whoops and cries they had begun before.

Brawnshanks lowered his hands. The stones were gone. He raised his arms slowly above his head, reeling as if he'd been in a fight.

"All hail the Great Dragon Monkey!" he shrieked. "All hail!"

There was another awkward moment as the monkeys looked at one another, and at Crookedclaw, and then began to call out in reply.

"All hail!"

"All hail the Great Dragon Monkey!"

"All hail!" Rain forced herself to yell in Lychee's voice, though the world was spinning strangely around her head and she felt like if she yelled too loud, she might faint.

"All hail," said Crookedclaw quietly.

When Rain told Ghost and Lychee what Brawnshanks had done, they looked at her as if *she* had gone ginkgo-brained.

“No, he didn’t,” Lychee said with a nervous laugh. “You’re joking.”

Rain gave him a baleful stare from her position sprawled across his nest. “Oh, how I wish I were.”

Slipping away from the Broken Forest to tell Ghost what was going on, and to freshen up her Lychee scent, hadn’t been too hard. There wasn’t a single monkey in the troop—except for Brawnshanks, and maybe Crookedclaw—who wasn’t walking around with a slightly glassy-eyed stare, or running off in their family bands to whisper to each other about what had happened, or—in the case of the Strong Arms and her other spy monkeys—sticking to Crookedclaw like glue. Those monkeys were smart: They knew that whether Brawnshanks was actually about to ascend to become some sort of Dragon Monkey or die a painful death with the stones rattling around inside him, Crookedclaw would know what they should do next.

Nobody had been watching Rain, so she’d made a run for it.

“What . . . ,” Ghost said. He stopped. “But what . . .” He stopped again.

Rain nodded sympathetically. She knew exactly how he was feeling.

“The fact is, whether it’s in his hand or . . . somewhere else . . . Brawnshanks has my stone, and I have to find a way to get it back.”

“How?” Lychee asked. “Can you just tear him open?”

“Tempting,” said Rain. She glanced over at Lychee again, suddenly suspicious. Was he going to run back to Brawnshanks and tell him everything? But he showed no sign of doing so. He was sitting with his back against a rock, chewing on a small bamboo cane that Ghost had allowed him for the Feast of Sun Fall. “But risky. I have to get him alone, or Crookedclaw will have the Strong Arms rip my ears off. I was hoping I could do a job for him that would mean I could report back in private, but . . . well . . . that’s another problem.”

“What now?” Ghost asked, his brows creasing together in worry.

“Well, it’s not quite as ginkgo-brained as the last thing,” Rain said, wriggling to scratch her back on the earth below Lychee’s nest and really work the scent in under her fur. “He wants me to kill you. The problem is, I can’t just say I’ve done it. Crookedclaw wants proof. And I don’t think she’d accept a clump of fur or a claw, even if you’d be willing to give it.”

“Then what are we going to do?” Ghost asked. “We can’t exactly send you back with some other panda’s head or leg. Even if we rolled it in chalk,

I don’t think it’d be much good close up.” He gave Lychee a meaningful stare.

Lychee’s jaws had fallen slowly open as Ghost had spoken, and now he swallowed, hard. “You can’t be serious,” he said. “You said no harm would come to me!”

“Calm down,” Ghost said with a chuckle. “I’m joking.”

Rain stared into the sky. The Feast of Sun Fall was over, and the stars should be coming out—but there were none that she could see. A thick cloud covered all the kingdom, and there was a strange chill in the air. As she watched, something drifted down and landed on Ghost’s nose.

He startled, and looked up.

“Is that snow?” he asked.

White flecks were starting to fall all around them, melting into their white fur but standing out on the black, and on the dark stones and burned tree bark. Rain licked at one that had landed on her paw. It tasted . . . strange.

“I don’t think it is,” she said, sitting up slowly. “It feels more like the ash from the forest fire. But there’s no fire. There wasn’t even after Brawnshanks made the burning river splash up out of the ground.”

“It’s not cold enough for snow, and not hot enough for ash,” Ghost said, and shivered. “I don’t like it.”

It feels like a terrible omen, Rain thought. *As if we weren’t drowning in those already. . . .*

Chapter Five

FOR A MOMENT, WHEN Shiver woke up under a thin layer of some white substance, she thought she was back in the mountains and it had snowed overnight. Then she remembered that she was in the Northern Forest, and she realized that the snow wasn't cold, and it wasn't melting. It smelled of the same strange rocky scent she'd tasted at the sacred vent before it had spewed half a hillside into the air. She got up, shaking off the white stuff, and peered through the trees. She could only see a few leopard-lengths ahead before the landscape seemed to vanish into nothingness. It was like standing in a snowstorm or a thick fog, but it was warm, and breathing in the swirling flakes made her cough and lick the bottom of her paws to get rid of the taste.

She was the first awake, but not for very long. One by one the pangolins and the other snow leopards woke and shook themselves, discovering the strange warm snow.

Very few of them spoke, and when they did, it was in hushed tones, as if the dampened sound of the white world were too fragile to disturb with ordinary grunts and growls.

"What *is* this?" Frost asked, shaking himself vigorously and then startling as the white stuff gently settled back to the ground and a few flakes landed on his nose. "It smells like the pangolins' vent—is this the smoke that came out when it went bang?"

"I think so," Shiver murmured back. "But it's everywhere. . . ."

"The burning river runs beneath the whole Northern Forest," said Spiral Moon, his eyes wide as he followed the swirling path of a drifting white flake. "Maybe more than one vent was destroyed yesterday."

"All the more reason to get moving," said Snowstorm. "Can you still lead us through this?"

"Down into the next valley," said Spiral Moon. "After that . . . I hope we can find our way."

Shiver and Snowstorm exchanged an apprehensive look, and Snowstorm's long tail swished anxiously, sending up flurries of white ash,

but neither of them said anything. What were their other options? Abandon the pangolins and try to make their way back to Ghost, or return to their home in the mountains and let the pandas try to solve the Dragon's problems all alone? No, all they could do was follow the pangolins wherever they were going. . . .

The sun had risen, but it lay behind the thick bank of white cloud, and it was impossible to tell how high. Even the shadows of the trees were dim and fuzzy-edged.

The pangolins led the way downhill, and the group left a trail of footprints in the white stuff as they clambered over the rocks: a multitude of tiny clawed prints and three sets of large paws. The pangolins, normally surprisingly steady on their little claws, seemed to find walking in the ash far more difficult; Snowstorm, Shiver, and Frost frequently had to stop to lift one down from a rock where it had found itself trapped. But it wasn't easy going for the snow leopards, either. Shiver's sense of smell was dulled and strange, which seemed to interfere with her balance, making her clumsy and uncertain.

It was a relief when they came across a small stream, and even though there was ash drifting on its surface, they could stop and wash their paws and drink a little. They kept close to it as they went on, and some of the pangolins chose to walk in the water itself, scrambling over wet rocks and little waterfalls rather than padding through the ash.

There was no way of telling how far they were from the bottom of the valley. The thick cloud obscured everything more than a few leopard-lengths from their noses, and every sense that Shiver would have used to guess their progress was muffled and unreliable. The air was growing warmer—perhaps the sun was rising higher, or perhaps they were dipping down into a more sheltered part of the valley.

The slope of the ground grew shallower, the stream slowing and gathering in wide pools between shelves of rock.

Suddenly, from out of the ashen cloud, a thin cry filled the air and echoed across the unseen valley. Shiver tensed, her hackles raising. The pangolins startled and the leopards quickly turned to look around them as the cry was joined by another, and another—long, warbling notes that rang out, shifted, changed, and trailed away.

"What in the name of the Snow Cat is *that*?" said Frost.

Shiver held her breath, listening hard. There was something so strange about the sound. Birds made long calls like that, but these were no birds. So did plenty of other animals, but usually in pain or fear or anger, signaling a warning to the rest of their kind. Shiver sensed nothing like that from the eerie voices around her now. If anything, listening to the song made her feel a strange, tingling calm.

For a moment, as the notes died away, she almost thought they were a song, with words full of meaning that she just couldn't quite understand. . . .

"Awa, oha, awa, oha," the voices called, quieter and quieter, as if moving farther away.

Then silence descended again, and the moment the song ended, she wasn't at all sure she had really heard it. She looked around at her littermates, and at the pangolins, searching for confirmation that it had been real after all. Confusion was deep in the furrowed fur of the leopards, and the pangolins' small, black eyes were still with attentiveness and perhaps some fear.

"Maybe it was the wind?" said Snowstorm. "Or a trick of this cloud somehow."

"I don't know," Shiver said, and opened her mouth to tell them how she had felt.

Then there was a burst of swirling ash between the trees as a large gray shape came snarling out of the cloud and lunged for the pangolins, slipping between Shiver and Frost.

A wolf!

Shiver glimpsed thin fur and sharp teeth passing her, and tried to get in its way, but she slipped on the ash and her snapping jaws caught nothing but stale air. The pangolins let out squeaks of terror and rolled into a cluster of shivering balls. But before the wolf could get its jaws around any of them, Snowstorm had barreled into it with a furious yowl. She knocked the wolf aside, then reared up, batting at it with her big paws and puffing up her thick fur, making herself twice the wolf's size.

It wisely backed away. Drool flecked its face, and its eyes were fixed on the pangolins, ducking and swaying to try to keep them in its sights while it looked for an opening to get past Snowstorm. Frost and Shiver ran up to stand beside her, blocking the wolf from the pangolins.

"Circle it," Snowstorm commanded, sounding just like their mother, Winter, when she'd taught them to hunt in the snowfields of the White

Spine Mountains.

“Where there’s one wolf, there could be more,” snarled Frost. “Pangolins, keep close! Watch out for the rest of the pack!”

Shiver cast a glance behind her, half expecting to see the other wolves leaping out of the cloud, delighted with the success of their pack mate’s distraction—but though she braced for it, it didn’t happen.

The one wolf that had attacked them was still pacing and snarling, even as Snowstorm and Frost carefully advanced on either side of it with bared teeth and swishing tails.

If it’s alone, it’s got no chance, Shiver thought. Even a healthy wolf in its prime would struggle against three snow leopards, and she was seeing now that this wolf didn’t look at all healthy. Its fur was thinning, and its skin hung loosely over a rib cage that stuck out when it panted. *Why doesn’t it run off? It must be desperate. . . .*

Snowstorm let out a yowling snarl and leaped at it at last, raking her claws across its side. The wolf yelped, and its back legs gave way a little. It stumbled away and disappeared into the swirling ash. Shiver couldn’t help the pang of pity that struck her heart as she watched it go, its thin tail between its legs. Every predator knew what it was like to be a few meals from starvation, and to lose out to bigger and tougher creatures. Even the snow leopards of the White Spine Mountains had had their share of nights when the hunting was bad and their bellies were empty.

“I think it’s gone,” said Snowstorm, pacing around the pangolins in a wide circle, peering into the ash cloud. “You can come out now.”

“No thanks,” squeaked Spiral Moon, both his voice and his small spherical body trembling.

“Come on,” said Shiver, gently nosing at the terrified pangolin. “It’s okay—the wolf is gone.”

But the pangolins were too frightened to move, and many of them seemed too frightened to speak. At last Spiral Moon managed to say: “What about the pack?”

“I think it was alone,” said Frost. “Anyway, if we don’t move from here and it does have a pack, it’ll be back with them any minute, and then it really *might* eat you all!”

There was a chorus of dismayed squeaks from the pangolins, and Shiver gave her brother an exasperated look.

She didn’t say so out loud, in case they didn’t want to think about it, but she was sure that Frost had forgotten how terrible the pangolins’ time as prisoners of the monkeys had been: trapped underground—imprisoned in a cavern that also, somehow, if they were to be believed, contained a river of fire—and then dragged out and split up from their friends and families in order to tear the Great Dragon into three pieces. No wonder they were jumpy—wolves and eerie singing voices must feel like one more horror on top of an already teetering pile.

“I don’t think it had a pack,” she said gently. “You didn’t see it close up, but it was thin and weak—even if it did come back with more, if they’re that hungry, we three leopards would be a match for them. Frost isn’t wrong, we’ll be better off if we move, but I promise we’ll keep you safe.”

Spiral Moon raised his head, his long nose slowly unfurling from the rest of his body. He sniffed the air, but Shiver was sure he wouldn’t smell much except the acrid scent of the ash.

“What about the strange noises?” he asked, fixing his glinting black eyes on Shiver. “Were those wolves too?”

“No,” said Shiver. “I don’t think so. But we need to move on to find out.”

Spiral Moon gave another shudder, then fully uncurled and stood up, clacking his claws together.

“Come on, everybody,” he said, nudging the next pangolin, who began to jerkily unfurl. “Shiver’s right. We’ll be safe when we reach the other vent. The Great Dragon will make sure of it. So we need to get there as soon as we can.”

Shiver watched with a strange pride as, one by one, each pangolin uncurled and joined in convincing the others.

“All right,” said Snowstorm. “Let’s go!” She hid her impatience pretty well, though her tail was puffed up and twitching.

Together the pangolins and the snow leopards started off again down into the valley. The ground, which had been turning shallower, suddenly dropped into a much deeper slope. On their left, a tall column of rock rose out of the ashy fog. At first Shiver thought it was one of the strange rock pillars that sometimes jutted up, all alone, between the hills of the Bamboo Kingdom. But the rock went on and on, until it became clear that their path was leading them down beside a cliff. It was sheer and craggy, but dripping

with dark vines. The ash had collected in hollows on the stone, looking even more like snow than it did on the sloping ground.

All of a sudden, Shiver stepped on something soft and ridged. She realized she had trodden on Swirling Storm's tail—but the pangolin didn't seem to have noticed. He was standing still, looking left and right, wide-eyed.

"Swirling Snow," he murmured, and for a moment Shiver thought the pangolin was simply commenting on the strange weather—perhaps he'd spotted some real snow among the ashy flakes. But then Swirling Storm turned and called out, "Swirling Snow! Snow!" and Shiver realized that of course it was the name of a pangolin. She didn't remember which one was Swirling Snow until Swirling Storm gripped on to her leg and gasped, "Have you seen my brother? The smallest of us, my youngest?"

Shiver had never understood the family relationships among the pangolins—each seemed self-contained and yet part of a whole in a way that she wasn't sure she could ever really grasp. But a glance at the pangolins in front of her was enough for her to know that the smallest of them was missing.

"Wait, Snowstorm," she called. "Don't go any farther!"

"What's going on?" Snowstorm yowled back from her position near the front of the group.

"Swirling Snow is gone!" cried Swirling Storm, and the pangolins began to panic again—one of them curled back into a ball, as if that would help, and the rest began to shakily run in all directions, calling for the young pangolin.

"Look after them. I'll go back," Shiver told Frost.

"Don't run off!" Frost said. "Stay close to me—we'll look this way."

Shiver hoped her littermates could keep an eye on the remaining pangolins—there was a real chance that if they scattered, they would lose another one, or more than one, in the shifting ashy fog.

"There's something wrong with this place," she heard Circling Breeze say as Shiver turned and stared back up the slope they'd just come down.

"It's the wolf," said another pangolin. "The wolf took him!"

Shiver tried to ignore the voices, though her heart pounded as she searched and sniffed for any sign of the small pangolin. The scents were confused by the other pangolins who'd just passed this way, and muffled by the ash. But Shiver focused, imagining Swirling Snow, sniffing and

waiting . . . and at last something chimed in her sense memory, like a drop of water falling into a clear pond. He'd been here . . . and he hadn't been any farther down the slope. His trail veered off, led to the top of a small jutting rock—and then vanished.

"Mmf!" said a tiny voice, and Shiver looked down into a heap of ash, a drift that had piled up against the windward side of the rock. It was moving.

Shiver leaped down and began to dig through the drift, and sure enough, a moment later a small nose and a pair of flailing clawed paws burst through the ash. Shiver let out a laugh as she nosed into the drift, pulled out Swirling Snow, and set him on his small paws. She licked him between the eyes as if he were a wayward cub who'd covered himself in mud, and then she led him, still snuffling and sneezing, back to the others.

The rest of the pangolins surrounded Swirling Snow with cries of relief, and he started to tell him about the terrible whiteness he hadn't been able to climb out of by himself. Snowstorm and Frost both let out long sighs. "Maybe we can actually get moving now," muttered Snowstorm. Then . . .

"Awa, oha, awa, oha!"

The leopards and the pangolins all started and looked around as the eerie calling started up again.

"Awa, oha! Awa, oha, awa, oha!"

First closer, then farther away, as if the cry was being passed from creature to creature across a wide space, and high over their heads. It sounded as if the creatures were arrayed across the sides of the valley, behind them and ahead of them, and all at once they had started to sing their strange song.

Awa, oha! the voices sang. And then, just like before, Shiver was sure she could hear words forming, too distant to fully understand. She thought she caught the word *see*, and *follow*. . . .

"What is this place?" Snowstorm gasped, turning to the pangolins. "Where have you led us?"

Chapter Six

THE FOREST WAS MADE of monkeys. Somewhere below the masses of golden-furred bodies Leaf knew there must be bark and leaf, fern and rock—but the monkeys swarmed so thick over all of it that she couldn't see anything that wasn't a twitching golden tail or snarling blue face. Like insects moving over the remains of a dead creature, the shifting monkeys made the trees seem to writhe.

Leaf was running, her paws pounding in a steady rhythm as if she were sprinting over flat grasslands, even though she could see the rocks and falls and bushes of the craggy Northern Forest as she passed by.

"Leaf," said the monkeys from the branches far overhead and from right by her ear as she passed a squirming mass of them that jostled for space on a flat rock. *"Leaf, Leaf, Leaf, Leaf!"*

She wouldn't listen. She had to get away. She held the Dark Dragon's stone clenched between her teeth, and with every step she felt as if her grip might falter and she might drop it into the hands of the monkeys. They stretched out their arms as she passed, not grabbing, just waiting for the inevitable slip. But she wouldn't do it. She couldn't. Not again.

She had to climb. The urge came from nowhere, and even as it filled her from ears to tail she knew that it wouldn't usually make sense to escape monkeys by climbing, and yet she *knew* that it was the right thing to do. And as soon as she'd thought that, a huge ginkgo tree loomed up out of the forest in front of her, its bark and branches clear of monkeys. It was so tall, she couldn't see the top of it.

She began to climb, finding it easy at first: Everywhere she reached for a claw hold she found one, and her legs barely tired at all until she was a long way from the ground. But the tree went on and on, until she wondered if it would ever end, or if she would just keep climbing up into the pale sky and never come down.

Perhaps it would be peaceful up in the clouds. Maybe she could leave all her worries down on the ground.

Higher and higher the tree rose, out of the forest canopy, until Leaf was sure she had climbed at least as high as the peak of the Dragon Mountain. She leaned out over the forest, reached out a paw, and held it in front of a cloud that floated by—it felt like dragging her paw through cool water.

She didn't want to look down. Up here the sky was bright, and below she knew that the forest was still swarming with monkeys. But still her eyes were drawn down, against her will, through the infinite spreading branches of the endless tree, to the forest. Sure enough, the tops of all the trees—impossibly far away and yet somehow still perfectly clear to see—were crowded with swaying, reaching golden monkeys, their blue faces turned up to stare at Leaf. . . .

Then there was a strange rustling, as if a strong wind were blowing across the monkey-covered trees, and a wave of change came over the faces of the monkeys. They lost all color, turning to black fur ringed with white. The golden bodies became black, and the reaching, grasping hands were withdrawn on arms that seemed long and gangly. Thousands of dark eyes stared at her, no longer threatening but now simply watching with a curious intensity. Somehow this made Leaf feel even more like hiding her face in the leaves of the great ginkgo than the aggressive grabbing of the golden monkeys.

These weren't the monkeys she knew. They were something else altogether.

She tried to pull back against the tree trunk, but suddenly it was wide and smooth, and her paw slipped. The branches were gone, leaving Leaf clinging desperately to a swaying black trunk without paw holds. Instead of the thick bark, her nose was pressed to a yielding, warm surface of smooth black scales.

The tree—the great snake that had been a tree—swayed and swerved and bent its long neck so that Leaf was sitting on it, gazing up at its huge head as it peered down at her. The vast mouth opened, black fangs glinting against a black tongue, and it let out a roaring hiss like the sound of the rapids in the great river.

Terror seized Leaf, and she tried to scramble down the snake's neck, but the soft warm scales slipped from under her paws and she began to fall. For a moment her legs flailed in the air, her body plummeting toward the forest of white-ringed faces and dark eyes.

Then the snake trunk twisted and curled around her, and she felt herself caught in soft black coils, cradled almost like a tiny cub against its mother's chest.

I was supposed to fall, she thought, looking up at the face of the snake, as it slowly morphed into the familiar bearded face of the Great Dragon. It gazed down on her with eyes that looked like the night sky, sprinkled with stars. *I gave up being a Speaker! I ran from my duty. I'm not good enough. . . .*

But the Dragon didn't let her go. It gently lowered her through the branches of the forest, which was empty now, the strange black monkeys having vanished. It laid her on the ground.

She opened her eyes into a darkness that was sprinkled with drifting white, and for a moment she wasn't sure which was the dream—the monkey forest and giant Dragon tree, or the gray flurries that passed in front of her eyes now, gleaming strangely in the moonlight. She was lying on the ground. As she breathed, more of the strange flakes stirred in front of her face.

"We can't stay here long," said Dasher's voice.

"I know," said Nightwalker.

Leaf raised her head, blinking, as if she could clear the swirling gray from her vision if she tried hard enough, but no matter what she did, it still coated everything. She began to be able to see, though: The sky was dark and the moonlight filtered through the strange gray cloud. She was lying in the grass on the top of a hill, a few thin tree trunks and tumbled rocks just visible over the lip of the slope before the cloud swallowed everything.

"They're still following us," said Dasher, and Leaf's heart gave a jolt.

Who's following us? Is it the golden monkeys—is that why they were in my dream? Or is it those strange black-and-white monkeys?

"You can't fight them on your own," Dasher went on. "And Leaf can't help in this state."

"So we find another way," growled Nightwalker. "I haven't come this far to give up now." She paced in front of Leaf's face without looking down—she seemed not to realize that Leaf was awake. Her tail was stiff and her hackles were rising.

Behind her, as she passed, Leaf saw movement in the swirling ash. A glint in the darkness. A twitch of an ear, the glitter of a pair of eyes—and then another, and another.

There was a howl.

Those are no monkeys, Leaf thought. *Those are wolves!*

She managed to move her head to look at Dasher, and saw that his fur was puffed up and his belly pressed flat to the ground. After all he'd been through, having two of his own family killed by snow leopards in the mountains, it was little wonder he was terrified.

Leaf took a deep breath and snorted the ash away from her muzzle. Then she heaved herself up, rolling onto her belly and then slowly up onto all four paws. Her legs felt unsteady beneath her, and her head was spinning, but she held on, taking one careful step and then another toward the approaching pairs of glinting eyes. She heard Dasher gasp and call her name. Nightwalker looked around, met Leaf's eyes, and said nothing, but Leaf could sense the tension coming off her in waves.

"I'm here," Leaf said. "I can help."

"Can you run?" said Dasher. "Come on, you two—we have to go, now!"

"It's too late for that," said Nightwalker. She looked over Leaf's shoulder, and Leaf slowly followed her gaze to see another pair of wolves emerging from the gray cloud behind them. On the other side of Nightwalker, too, the telltale panting and swishing of gray tails could be heard through the ash.

"Surrounded," Leaf muttered. She blinked hard, frowning as she tried to focus on the real world, though the dream of the Dragon's coils still felt like it was wrapped around her, heavy and warm.

"Stay put—don't move," said Nightwalker. She stepped in front of Leaf, and then behind her, turning to stare into the eyes of each of the wolves climbing inexorably up the hillside toward them. Then the tiger took a deep breath—Leaf could see her ribs moving as she sucked the air in, and feel the shivering around them as Nightwalker let it out in a long, angry roar that echoed between the hillsides, rolling on and on like thunder and coming to a slow stop in a deep, throaty growl.

Several of the wolves stumbled. Some even turned away. But most kept coming, even if their paws trembled as they approached. It wasn't enough. There were too many of them.

Leaf drew herself up to her full height and planted her paws in the ashy grass, fighting the dizziness as she braced herself for the battle that was about to begin.

Chapter Seven

BY THE TIME RAIN made it back to the Broken Forest, it had fallen into chaos. Bursts of ash and clouds of smoke drifted across the landscape. The hot black crusty rivers were running all over the place now, raising the temperature to a sweltering heat that was almost unbearable even when she couldn't see them. In the places where the rivers were visible, wherever the crust broke apart or the river ran over a new patch of plant matter, flames sprang up, seared the air, and then died in puffs of awful smoke. Horrible fumes in the air made Rain feel dizzy when she got too close.

She wanted nothing more than to just leave this place, but she couldn't. She had to get to Brawnshanks and take back the stone—before all of this, somehow, got even worse.

Rain could hear cackling monkey voices through the ash, and see bursts of red light—she wasn't certain what they were up to, but whatever it was, it seemed to be making more smoke and more flames. She could only imagine at first that the monkeys had all gone mad, possibly inspired by their crazed leader swallowing the Dragon Speaker stones. But then she climbed to the top of a tall jutting rock formation to try to stick her head up out of the low-lying foulness in the air, and found she could see groups of monkeys crossing the forest in what looked like organized troops. These weren't the movements of frenzied animals—the monkeys carried huge leaves that bowed and dripped with water, requiring care and teamwork to get them across the hillsides and through the ash clouds.

Rain clambered into a nearby tree to follow one group more closely. When they got to a burning crack in the ground, they carefully and methodically tipped the water in before running back, screeching in fear and exhilaration as the burning river exploded. Rain threw herself out of the tree as a splash of molten rock flew up into the branches and ignited the leaves. She landed in the undergrowth with a thump and ran from the burning tree into the warm gray fog.

Her fur prickling with dismay, she lay in wait for the monkeys, guessing that they would lead her back to Brawnshanks if she followed them for long

enough. It was easy to fall in behind them, padding softly in the ash. The crackling of fires and distant yelling of monkeys and other creatures made her steps almost inaudible, and she was sure nobody was going to catch her scent—or Lychee's—over this stinking ashy fog. As long as she kept doing the voice, the only part of her disguise she was worried about was the charcoal on her face—what if her eyes watered so much that it ran off?

Following the monkeys turned out to be a good plan—they seemed to know the safe paths through the forest much better than she did. If she'd tried to make her way straight to the spot where they eventually led her, she'd have had to double back more than once to avoid the newly opened steaming fissures in the ground.

She heard Brawnshanks speaking up ahead and steeled herself to take on Lychee's walk and voice once more, when there was a loud bang, a flash of red-and-white light, and a chorus of monkey screams from somewhere to her left. Some of the screeches wavered and faded as monkeys fled through the trees—others were cut off suddenly. Rain pressed through a large fern in time to see the aftermath of a huge explosion in the valley just below her—sizzling ash fell like rain, and several monkeys lay stunned or wounded by the side of a glowing river. A great gout of lava had burst forth, splashing up a rock wall, and was drying there with a distressing *plink-plink* sound. But that wasn't the worst thing: She looked down just in time to see a monkey sink below the lava, vanishing into the river of instant death.

Echoing wails of sadness began to fill the valley, but then a voice cut through them all, commanding even though it was high and rasping.

"Silence!" screamed Brawnshanks. He was standing alone on a tall rock formation, waving his arms and reeling slightly. One hand kept straying to his stomach, but he showed no sign of pain—only a crazed light in his eyes. "Sacrifices must be made! The fires of progress burn inside us all! When the new mountain is complete, we will look down on the ruined Bamboo Kingdom and remember those who fell!"

The new mountain? Rain thought. *Is that what he thinks he's doing?* She guessed that it made a kind of twisted, flawed sense—the burning rivers did turn to a kind of black stone as they cooled. And she could imagine, having stood inside the hollow cone of the Dragon Mountain, that it might have been made by an explosion of this sort, long, long ago.

But the amount of it he'd have to summon to make a mountain would kill us all in an instant, she thought. *Including Brawnshanks and all his*

monkeys! I've got to stop this. . . .

She tried to focus. Brawnshanks was alone on the rock—but he was surrounded by monkeys, and on the other side of a black rivulet of smoking ground. To get to him right now, Rain would have to take the simple approach: running up and just attacking him head-on. But she couldn't, not with so many monkeys there, and so much foul smoke and spitting earth. So how was she going to reach him?

She scanned the monkeys around the base of the rock. Perhaps she could get one of them to move, persuade them that Brawnshanks wanted to see her?

Sitting quietly on a ledge, just below Brawnshanks, was Crookedclaw. Her knees were tucked to her chest, and she was watching the frantic and terrible goings-on with a strangely impassive, calm expression. Rain's neck prickled with suspicion and confusion. Crookedclaw *must* understand how bad this was. But she wasn't doing anything about it. *Why?* she wondered. *Loyalty to Brawnshanks?* But surely Crookedclaw was too smart to let her leader burn down their home, and all the monkeys with it, just for the sake of loyalty.

Rain turned back to the other monkeys. She realized, as she watched them, that sometimes one of the monkeys would put down its leaf or stare at Brawnshanks in horror and fury, as if it were about to turn on him at last—but then he would meet its gaze with his glinting eyes, and it would simply go back to what it was doing. It was as if he had some hold over them that went beyond the command of a tyrant leader over his terrified troop.

My Dragon Speaker stone. He swallowed it, and now it's giving him power over them.

It wasn't really the time to stop and wonder about the nature of the Dragons, but Rain couldn't help thinking over what Ghost had said about the powers of the other stones. Unlike the glowing path of the Light Dragon or the shadowy shrouding of the Dark Dragon, the main thing her Dragon—the Between Dragon? The Invisible Dragon?—had given her was the knowledge of when to trust Blossom and Ginseng, the two pandas she had trusted least in the world.

Could that power work in both directions? Could it be that her Dragon was helping Brawnshanks, against its will, win the total trust of his followers?

Rain looked at the golden monkeys and, for the first time, her heart squeezed in sympathy for them.

Crookedclaw's keen eyes fell on Rain. For a moment they locked gazes, and Rain forgot her disguise as she stared into the monkey's face, willing her to *do something* to stop the madness unfolding around them. *Or does Brawnshanks have power over you, too?* she wondered. It was hard to imagine, but how else to explain why Crookedclaw was going along with all this? *Unless she has her own reasons. . . .*

Then Rain remembered herself—or remembered that she was supposed to be Lychee—and looked away. She muscled down the hill, doing her best Lychee swagger, shouldered a wounded monkey out of the way, and picked up its still-dripping wet leaf in her mouth. She marched up to the smallest fissure she could see and chucked the leaf toward the hot stone. A flash and a shower of sparks went up as the leaf landed.

Rain turned and hurried away. Was it enough to keep Crookedclaw convinced? She couldn't tell, and she didn't wait around to find out.

Rain kept mostly hidden after that, watching Brawnshanks for any moment of weakness. But the bustling activity went on all day, and Brawnshanks didn't move from his rock, nor did his guarding monkeys. As the sun sank toward the horizon and the smoke clouds were cut through with bright shafts of light and black shadows, Rain gathered a meager feast and settled herself in a small hollow in a nearby hillside. The monkeys seemed to be exhausted by their destructive frenzy and were clambering into the branches of the trees that had survived the terrible day, passing out with limbs dangling between the leaves, or curled up against the trunks with their heads tucked under their arms. Rain wished Ghost were here, but her heart ached most when she thought of Leaf.

Leaf would know what to do. Leaf was so good at being a Dragon Speaker—apart from the bit where it was a bad idea to go missing. Surely if Leaf had had the stone that could show you the hearts of other creatures, she would have fixed everything by now. Rain sighed and spat out a mouthful of burned, gritty leaves that she hadn't noticed were attached to her bamboo, and then lay down and curled into a ball.

She knew she ought to stay awake and keep watching Brawnshanks, stay alert for an opening. But before very long at all, her eyes drifted shut and she fell into a fitful slumber. She dreamed she was lying in a forest

where the air was clear and the trees were full of monkeys, though they weren't the ones she was sleeping nearby in the real world—these were bigger and had no tails, and their black eyes stared out of their dark faces at Rain as she slept.

She woke with a jolt at the sound of a familiar voice.

"Let go of me," it snarled. "I swear I'll have your tail, Jitterpaws. . . ."

"Shut up, traitor," said another monkey voice. "Brawnshanks! We found her! We found Nimbletail!"

Rain was on her paws and creeping toward Brawnshanks's rock in a few heartbeats. Sure enough, she peered over a fallen, charred tree trunk and saw a gang of Strong Arms prodding a furious-looking Nimbletail up the sloping side of the rock toward their leader. Brawnshanks was awake, sitting at the top and staring with savage delight at the prisoner.

"We were right not to kill her band just yet," Crookedclaw was saying, watching Nimbletail with a smug smile. "Just as I said—the moment she found out Quicktail was alive, she tried to free her and the rest, but the Strong Arms were lying in wait."

Rain's heart squeezed with anxiety.

Nimbletail had risked everything to help her. She was supposed to be Crookedclaw's spy, but she'd turned traitor to tell Rain what was going on among the monkeys. She had tried to warn her about Lychee, too. And all of it despite the fact that Crookedclaw had threatened to kill her beloved sister, Quicktail, along with the rest of her family.

"Good work as always, Crookedclaw," Brawnshanks said. "Kill them all."

Rain would not let that happen.

Faking a casual stroll and a yawn, she emerged from behind the tree trunk and walked over to the base of the rock.

"What's going on?" she said in her best laconic Lychee voice. "Ah—you finally caught the traitor! Rain will be crushed to hear she's been executed."

She didn't meet Nimbletail's eyes.

Don't react, she begged her friend silently. *Don't recognize me, or don't react. . . .*

There was a horrible pause, and then Nimbletail spat, "Traitor? *You're* the traitor, Lychee! You've betrayed all the pandas by throwing in your lot with Brawnshanks."

One of the Strong Arms gave Nimbletail a tweak on the back of the neck, and she yelped and fell silent. Rain still didn't look, but she felt her racing heart slow just a little.

She twitched her ears as if she'd just had a thought. "Brawnshanks, allow me to take care of the traitor. I'd like to leave her somewhere Rain will be able to see what's happened to her."

"Finding it tricky to dispose of the white panda, are you?" said Brawnshanks shrewdly. "Well, if you're thinking this will be enough to get you your reward, you are mistaken."

"I will kill Ghost," said Rain. "I swear it—before we have raised the new mountain, you'll see me throw his corpse into the lava."

A promise she felt very comfortable making, considering that there was no chance that Brawnshanks would ever build his "new mountain."

"But you're right that it's not easy to get to Ghost," she added. "So let me do this, too. To prove I'm a true servant to the Dragon Monkey."

Brawnshanks broke into a horrible smile. "Leave her body in the trees in the Southern Forest," he said. "I want all the pandas to see what becomes of those who aren't loyal to the Dragon Monkey. Jitterpaws, take some Strong Arms and go with Lychee to get the rest of the traitor's band. When it's done, leave them in the trees too."

Rain tried not to shudder—or to look too disappointed. She'd thought she might get to take Nimbletail off by herself, and now she was stuck with the Strong Arms. But she could deal with that, and perhaps there was an upside to it too. They would lead her to Nimbletail's band.

As they descended from the rock, she took up the rear of the group, growling at Nimbletail's ankles, and let the Strong Arms lead the way across the smoky forest floor, avoiding the still-steaming black fissures in the ground. They made their way to a shallow cave in the bottom of a hill, hardly big enough for a panda to stand up in. There three golden monkeys sat huddled together, staring out past a Strong Arm guard who was holding a large rock in his paw.

No, four golden monkeys—one of them was just a cub, clinging on to its mother's fur and trembling. Rain was struck again by how *unnecessary* all this conflict was. The monkeys weren't bad creatures—if Brawnshanks had contented himself with just being in charge of the monkeys, so much death and danger would never have troubled the Bamboo Kingdom.

Rain shook herself.

“I’ll take things from here,” she said.

“Brawnshanks told us to come with you,” said Jitterpaws.

“To fetch the band,” she sneered. “I don’t think I need any help disposing of a bunch of pathetic traitors.”

Jitterpaws still hesitated. She gave Rain a suspicious glance, which Rain, with some effort, ignored.

“Do you think that little rock will do the job?” Rain asked with a casual, Lychee-like chuckle. She knew it would be impossible for one panda to defeat five monkeys alone, but she didn’t need to defeat them—she only needed to convince Jitterpaws that she could. “Brawnshanks wants them taken to the Southern Forest. Are you going to carry them there? Or do you want to leave that to *me*?” She reared up on her back legs and let out a snort and a bark, exposing her large, sharp teeth.

Think like a predator! she told herself. *Ghost can do it—you can too.*

She thumped back down onto all four paws, close to Jitterpaws’s face. The Strong Arm looked her up and down, swallowed, and then shrugged.

“If you want to do it, be my guest,” she said, and backed up, hooting quietly to the others. “Let’s go. Crookedclaw has more work for us.”

Rain wasn’t sure if that was true or an excuse, and she didn’t care. She nudged Nimbletail roughly into the cave with the others. A young female threw her long arms around Nimbletail and buried her blue face in her fur. Rain stepped up close, baring her teeth in a low growl and listening for the retreating paws of the Strong Arms. When she could no longer hear them, she whispered to Nimbletail, in her own voice:

“Are they gone?”

“It *is* you!” Nimbletail whispered back, her voice trembling. “I thought I might be dreaming.”

“You’re . . . you’re not going to hurt us?” asked the monkey still clinging to Nimbletail’s side.

“It’s all right, Quicktail,” Nimbletail said. “Everyone—this is Rain. She’s one of the Dragon Speakers.”

The monkeys stared at Rain with wide-eyed amazement.

“We’re saved!” cried one of the two male monkeys.

“We still have to get all of you out of here,” Rain said, “before they tell Crookedclaw and she sends them back to check up on us. Are any of you hurt? Can you walk?”

“Goldback’s got a twisted ankle,” said the other male monkey.

“I’m fine,” said Goldback, and tried to push out of the cave past Rain, but she stumbled, and the baby tumbled from her side.

“Climb on,” Rain said to Goldback, dipping her head to show her back to the monkeys. The baby monkey didn’t hesitate, but buried his small fingers in her fur and clambered up onto the back of her neck, clinging on tight. His mother followed, a little grumpily, and Rain set off at once, the rest of the band scampering along behind her. Every so often Nimbletail would leap up into the trees and look around, calling down whispered warnings of monkey patrols crossing their path or places where the burning rivers had blocked the way. The others stayed on the ground, sticking close to Rain.

“Where are we going?” asked Goldback’s mate.

“The Southern Forest,” Rain said. “I’m taking you to the pandas. You’ll be safe there.”

There was a silence as they crept through a patch of ferns dangerously close to a tree full of slumbering monkeys. Then, once they were far enough away, Quicktail said quietly, “Are you sure the pandas will hide us? We haven’t exactly done anything to earn their trust.”

“Nimbletail has,” said Rain. “And any enemy of Brawnshanks is a friend of mine.”

This seemed a good enough answer for Flicktail, Swingtail, and Goldback, but Rain sensed a quiet thoughtfulness from Quicktail as they finally reached the Egg Rocks crossing and the monkeys began to leap from one side of the river to the other. Rain waded through the black water, with Goldback and Duskback sitting on her shoulders and clinging to each other. It was blessedly cool after the stifling and stinking Broken Forest—but even here, in the dark, Rain could see patches of ash and burned wood floating down the stream.

Quicktail and Nimbletail reached the opposite side first, and Rain saw them talking together urgently before the others caught up with them.

“Rain,” Nimbletail said, once they were standing on the southern bank. “My sister has something she wants to say.” She nudged Quicktail, and she stepped forward.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I was a Strong Arm. I *wanted* to be a Strong Arm. I didn’t even think about what damage Brawnshanks might be doing . . . I just wanted to help my band and serve the troop. But I know now, and I want to make amends.”

Rain sighed. Part of her wanted to be harsh to Quicktail, to point out that *her sister* hadn't needed any help figuring out Brawnshanks's evil ways. But if she couldn't make peace with any of the golden monkeys who'd followed him, there would be no hope for peace between them ever, even when he was gone.

"Take your family to the pandas," she said. "Stay safe there, and make sure they understand what went wrong as well as you do. We can talk about amends when this is all over."

Nimbletail gave Rain a grateful look and led her band away into the trees.

Rain stood and watched until they were gone. Even though they weren't with her, as she splashed back across the river and set her gaze on the sickly red glow between the trees of the Northern Forest, she felt much less alone.

Chapter Eight

"WE'RE NOT AFRAID OF you," Snowstorm announced to the echoing singsong cries that filled the valley, as Shiver circled the pangolins.

"Yeah!" Frost added. "So get lost!"

"Oh!" the voices called. *"Oh! Oh!"* And then . . . *"Lost! Lost! Get lost!"*

Shiver's tail twitched as the words began to emerge from the noise, this time clear enough that she could tell that the pangolins and the other leopards had heard them.

"Awa, oha, lost, oh lost!" the voices sang, but the singing creatures were still invisible, hidden in the shadows behind the drifting clouds of ash.

"Show yourselves!" Shiver snapped. "We're not scared—let us see what you are!"

"Oha, awa," sang the voices, *"scared, not scared, and what are you?"*

"Maybe we should just go back," Frost whispered. "The pangolins can't take much more of this." Sure enough, half the pangolins had already curled into balls again.

"If it's not the wolves, then it's a distraction that could give the wolves time to catch up," Snowstorm muttered back. "Maybe we should go. Spiral Moon, is there any other way to get to this second sacred place?"

Spiral Moon's eyes glittered with worry. "I—I don't know," he said. "I only knew we needed to go down into this valley. I'm sorry . . . this is all my fault . . . we may never find it now. . . ."

"Well, we're not done yet," said Shiver. An idea had struck her. She pricked her ears and listened to the singing voices, waiting for something like a gap in the repetitive chanting. Then she cleared her throat and raised her voice. "We are searching for a sacred place," she declared into the cloud. Snowstorm and Spiral Moon both stared at her as if she'd lost her mind, but she held her ground. "It's a place where we might listen for the words of the Great Dragon!"

"Great Dragon!" The tone of the song seemed to change, to become less eerie, less mocking, somehow more thoughtful. *"Sacred, a sacred*

place! The words of the Dragon!”

“Oha! Awa! The words of the Dragon!” came a singular voice, and out of the ash cloud there dropped, all of a sudden, a large dark shape. It landed on the ground in front of Shiver, and she startled—she’d been half expecting another wolf, so the sight of it dropping from the sky made her yelp—but then the creature raised its head, tilting its face in curiosity, and she realized that it was a monkey.

Not like the golden monkeys of the Broken Forest, though. This one was a little larger, and her arms and torso were longer. She was black-furred, except for a ring of white around her dark face, and she had no tail.

“What are you?” the creature asked, speaking now rather than singing, though her voice was still strangely lilting and tuneful. “Why have you come to our valley searching for the voice of the Dragon?”

Whenever she spoke, other voices sang her words back, sometimes harmonious, other times dissonant, producing the effect of an ever-shifting song that built and faded, layering meaning on top of the words that had been said.

“What are you?” they chanted. *“The Dragon, the Dragon, the voice of the Dragon?”*

More of the creatures emerged from the fog, some walking up to the leopards and pangolins with curious, gangly movements, others climbing down from the trees, until they were completely surrounded. Shiver braced herself, trying not to look threatening, but not taking her eyes off the leader of the new monkeys either. Were they in league with Brawnshanks too?

“Not many come to our valley,” said one, and the others repeated: *“Not many come, they don’t come to the valley, aha, owa!”* another added.

“Why are you here?”

The creatures crowded in closer—but despite their eerie singing, there was nothing particularly menacing about them. They seemed curious. A small one hurried up to Shiver and tugged on her fur.

“How sharp are your claws?” he asked in a whisper that was echoed only by one other monkey. “Can I climb on your back?”

“Why are you here?” another one said again. “Who are you?”

“My name is Shiver,” said Shiver. “These are my littermates, Snowstorm and Frost. We’re snow leopards.”

“Leopards, snow leopards, awa oha,” sang several monkeys under their breath. *“Shiver and Snowstorm and Frost.”*

“And these are the Children of the Dragon,” Shiver went on. “They’re pangolins, who hear the Dragon through their sacred vent, but it stopped working when the ash clouds burst it open.”

“We heard stories that there was another vent beyond this valley,” said Spiral Moon, bravely stepping forward to speak to the monkey. “Do you know where we might find it?”

“Find it? Here,” she said. “You have found it.”

There was a chorus of gasps and mutterings from the pangolins, who abruptly seemed much less frightened—despite only having the black monkeys’ word for it.

“And who and what are you?” asked Snowstorm, with the caution that the pangolins suddenly lacked.

“My name is Quiet,” said the monkey. “We are the Cloud Keepers.”

“Awa! Oha! The Cloud Keepers!” sang the others, loud and proud, echoing around them.

“I’ve never seen monkeys without tails,” said Frost, and Shiver shot him a warning look—if these really were the creatures the pangolins were looking for, they didn’t want to start out by insulting them! Luckily, Quiet didn’t seem bothered by it.

“We are not monkeys,” put in another of the creatures. “We are gibbons! No tails here. Don’t need them.”

“Is the Cloud your sacred vent?” asked Curling Star, becoming braver. “We are honored to meet fellow keepers of the Dragon’s voice.”

“It sounds like it is the place you are searching for,” said Quiet. “Come, come—follow and see.” She beckoned, and with a deep breath and a shrug the leopards and the pangolins began to follow her through the swirling ash cloud.

“Follow and see! Oha awa, follow and see!” sang the gibbons, and Shiver realized that they had been singing something like that when she’d first heard them.

Most of the gibbons melted away into the fog as they walked, leaving Quiet and two others leading the group down into the lush bottom of the valley.

“Your Cloud hasn’t been hurt by the ash?” Snowstorm asked Quiet as they walked.

“No,” said Quiet. “We are far enough from the burning river—although —hmm.” She fell silent for a while.

Shiver wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but it didn’t sound good.

It was obvious as they traveled that the bottom of the valley would have been beautiful on a clear day—even through the drifting clouds and the dim light of evening, Shiver could see that the path was lined with lush plants: Green and yellow and red leaves crowded the sides of the valley, while flowers with tiny, delicate pink petals and others with huge clusters of white seemed to burst from the fog as they walked. There were trees and bushes full of fruit, their scents mingling in a strange sticky sweetness that Shiver found slightly off-putting, but the pangolins chattered to each other excitedly, and a few of them paused to pick round, juicy fruits and nibble on them as they walked.

“The Dragon must love these gibbons,” Spiral Moon said approvingly as he licked a plump red fruit.

“We’re here,” said Quiet, stopping abruptly. “The home of the Cloud.” Shiver looked around. She couldn’t see any cloud—at least, nothing different from the ones they’d been walking through all day. The gibbon had stopped in a hollow, at a spot that Shiver thought at first was a thin passage between two high cliff walls—but as they drew closer, she realized that the two rock formations were quite different. On the left, the stone was slick-looking and shiny, with no paw holds at all, and no vegetation except for a few thin patches of glistening moss. On the right, the stone was more like a jumble of rocks and earth, with vines and bushes growing from gaps and ledges large enough for a creature to stand on. Shiver realized that the rocks on the right weren’t a cliff at all, but one of the tall rock columns that stood up in the middle of the northern valleys, just like the one in the center of the Endless Maw that the leopards had to leap to in order to make it across the chasm. She couldn’t see the top of either side clearly.

The pangolins and leopards gathered around Quiet in the hollow between the two rock formations, looking at her and at each other, expectant. When they were all there and watching, Quiet turned and pointed upward, into the mist, and began to sing once more.

“Aha, owa, away in the sky, Cloud Keepers watch, Cloud Keepers listen.”

“*Cloud Keepers listen,*” came a chorus of voices—though when Shiver turned, she couldn’t see any other gibbons around them. Where were they, that they could hear every word Quiet said?

“It’s up there?” said Snowstorm, squinting into the ashy fog.

“A cave,” said Quiet. “An opening in the sheer stone. The Cloud lives there.”

Shiver saw Snowstorm look at the sheer rock face, then at the jumbled column, her face thoughtful.

“So,” she said. “To reach it you climb these rocks on the right, then jump across?”

“Snow leopard, smart leopard,” said Quiet with a delighted smile. “Yes indeed. Up we go.”

“But wait,” said Spiral Moon, his voice trembling a little. “We—we can’t do that.”

“Some of us might make it to the top,” Swirling Storm agreed, “but we’ll never make the leap across. What do we do now?”

“I’ll try it,” said Circling Breeze.

“No,” said Shiver. “Believe me, it’s too far. You don’t want to fall from up there.”

Snowstorm and Frost both looked at their paws.

It was a shorter drop than the one that had killed their mother, but for a little pangolin, it was certainly far enough to be fatal.

“Then what can we do?” Circling Breeze asked.

“Send your friends,” said Quiet, nodding toward the snow leopards. “They will bring back the Cloud’s message.”

“We’ll do our best,” Snowstorm promised. “Though I’ve never gotten a message from a cloud before. . . .”

Shiver thought about the way Ghost had described his visions from the Great Dragon, before the monkeys split it into three. She couldn’t really imagine seeing anything like that herself—but she had to try.

“All right,” said Spiral Moon. “Good luck. Please be careful, and come back quickly!”

“We will,” said Shiver as Quiet leaped up onto the rock column and grabbed a pawful of vines, pulling herself up quickly and easily until she was nothing but a moving shadow behind the drifting ash.

Frost leaped up after her at once. Shiver watched as he tested his paw holds, gripping the crumbling rock and soil and testing to see if they would take his weight. Snowstorm followed him, eyeing the route she would take and then making progress in large leaps and quick scrambles, almost keeping up with Quiet herself.

Shiver took a deep breath and gave the pangolins a reassuring look before she followed. The rock column wasn't too hard to climb—there were paw holds, plants to get her claws into, places she could press her side against the stone to help her balance. But there were few places she could actually stop and catch her breath, and her heart began to race as she watched her littermates vanish ahead of her. She knew she couldn't go as fast as they could, and that it wouldn't make any sense for them to wait. She just had to take her time, and she'd reach the top soon. But it still made her fur stand on edge with anxiety to see them disappear into the fog, especially once the pangolins and then the valley floor itself were lost in mist below her.

At last she saw the swishing of a thick snow-leopard tail above her head, and she pulled herself up onto a thin ledge to join Frost.

"Look," her brother said. "There!"

She pointed her ears across the gap to the sheer cliff side. Sure enough, there was a dark opening in the stone, about twice as wide as a gibbon. A trail of thin white steam was rising from it.

Is that the Cloud? Shiver wondered. *Where is it coming from?*

Up here the ash in the air was less thick, and Shiver wondered if it might finally be stopping. The steam seemed to push the ash away as it flowed out of the cave.

Suddenly a white shape poked out of the darkness, and Shiver realized that her sister had made the jump and was already inside. Snowstorm looked over the gap to her littermates and gave them a blinking grin.

"Come on!" she said. "It's not as far as the Maw, and it's amazing in here!"

But Frost didn't move. He stared over at Snowstorm, and then down at the misty gap between the column and the cliff.

"It just . . . hmm." He cleared his throat. "It's a long way down."

"I'm sure it looks farther than it is," Shiver said, trying to be reassuring. "It's not as deep as the Maw or as far across. It just looks like it because we can't see the bottom; on a clear day it wouldn't be scary."

"But it's not a clear day, is it?" said Frost.

Something shifted on the column beside them, and another gibbon clambered past with a solemn nod and leaped, soaring across the gap and landing easily within the cave entrance.

“They’re smaller than us—if they can make it, then we can,” said Shiver—partly to steady herself.

It’s all right for you, Frost, she thought. *You’ve crossed the Endless Maw. I never have. . . .*

But they could do it. She had to believe they both could.

Frost looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. Bunching his muscles, fixing his gaze on the cave, he paused, and then he leaped. He made it look easy, sailing through the air with the perfect amount of power to reach the lip of the cave and land with all four paws safely on the stone. Shiver climbed up to the ledge he’d jumped from and stared across the gap, trying to remind herself of the positivity she’d just given Frost. He was right: It *did* look like a long way down.

“You can do it, Shiver,” Snowstorm called from the other side. “We can’t leave the pangolins waiting down there. Besides, Ghost needs us to do this.”

Shiver took the deepest breath she could. She tried to imagine that instead of the ashy gray depths beneath her, she was just leaping between two rocks sticking out from a nice stable grass field, or a cool, shallow pond. It really wasn’t that far. She could do this.

Her paws were trembling on the rock, but she forced herself to keep them still, look over the gap, pick her landing spot just beyond the opening, and *jump*.

For a moment, as she passed across the gap, she thought she wouldn’t make it. Her back legs weren’t strong enough. . . .

Then she got her front paws onto the stone ledge and pushed with all her might, levering herself forward and into the cave. She landed with less grace than her littermates, in a sprawl, with her heart racing and her ribs aching as she gasped for breath. But she’d made it!

“You did it!” said Frost, nudging her with his nose. “I knew you’d be fine.”

“Shiver, look,” said Snowstorm. “Does this place remind you of anything?”

Shiver got up, panting, and looked up at the ceiling where her sister was staring, eyes glimmering in the low light. From outside, the cave had seemed plain and dark, but now that she was inside and her eyes were adjusting to the dim light, she could see that it was a long tunnel that ran deep into the hillside—and the rocks were a riot of different colors, bright

blues and greens and reds and yellows, all swirling around each other as if they'd been dropped into turbulent water and then solidified into stone. On the ceiling, the white steam flowed between dripping, striped stalactites.

"It's like the cave in the mountains," Shiver murmured, awestruck. "The one where Ghost found the Dragon Speaker stone!"

"This place must be connected to the Dragon somehow, right?" Snowstorm mumured. Shiver didn't have a chance to reply, because the gibbons' song started up again, echoing down the cavern from somewhere deeper inside.

"Awa oha, awa oha, follow and see, follow and see!"

Another gibbon appeared in the mouth of the cave and gently reached out a hand to pat Shiver on the side of the neck before heading inside, beckoning the leopards to follow. They didn't have very far to go before they found the rest of the gibbons: a circle of black furry bodies swaying together around a gently rising coil of steam.

"The Cloud," they murmured, sometimes speaking, sometimes singing, falling in and out of harmony and discord with every word. *"The Cloud, the Cloud, follow and see! See the Dragon's tail, follow and see!"*

Shiver turned to the one who'd led them inside, who hadn't quite joined the circle yet.

"What's happening?" she whispered. "I can't see anything."

"We see glimpses," said the gibbon. "Shapes in the mist. There are tales to be seen there, if you're lucky."

Shiver sat up as tall as she could and stared over the shoulders of the gibbons into the white steam. They carried on singing and chanting, sometimes all together, sometimes in call and response, and sometimes in a chaotic muttering where each individual seemed to be listing the things it could supposedly see. She caught the word *eyes* and the word *kingdom* but couldn't make any sense of the rest at all. Once or twice, something about the movement of the steam did make her think that perhaps she could see a tail, or the body of a snake—but after watching for a while, she was fairly sure it was just the swirling shapes created by the rising vapor.

At last the gibbons broke apart and started to chatter excitedly to each other and to the leopards.

"Did you see?" asked Quiet, hurrying over to them. "Did you follow and see?"

“I didn’t see anything,” said Snowstorm. “Did the Dragon have a message for us?”

“Every gibbon will tell their own message,” said Quiet. “Let us go to the pangolins; there is much to say.”

The leap back to the column was easier—there were many more places to grip, and Shiver already knew she could make the jump. She clambered down with Snowstorm and Frost, following on the heels of the gibbons—seven or eight of them had emerged from the cave and gone swinging away down the column, singing as they threw themselves easily from handhold to handhold in more of a controlled tumble than a careful descent. Shiver hurried after them, keen not to miss anything they had to say, and landed with a soft thump in the ashy grass just as the pangolins were gathering, eyes bright and claws clacking.

“Listen and see! Hear and imagine!” the gibbons began to chant together, low and harmonious, and one by one they raised their heads and began to sing out the things they had seen.

“Three pairs of eyes, far apart, far from home, home at last,” sang one.

“Watching the kingdom, watching us all, fur, feather, and scale,” another agreed.

“A Dragon split into three,” sang another, “a kingdom divided by fire!”

“Every paw and every feather must also split in three,” said a fourth.

“To be whole, we must part. As the Dragons are, every creature must be,” said the first one.

“Light and Dark,” sang Quiet, and all the gibbons joined in as she repeated the words.

“Light, Dark, and . . . Harmony.”

The song hung in the air on the word *Harmony*, fading as one by one each gibbon fell silent, until there was a blank hush over the valley.

The pangolins looked at each other, then hurriedly scrambled into a huddle, whispering among themselves. Snowstorm looked at Shiver, her tail curling in confusion, and Shiver shook her head—she wasn’t sure what the gibbons were saying either, and she certainly didn’t know what the pangolins were doing. Had they come all this way for nothing?

The gibbons themselves seemed to understand what was happening, though. They waited patiently for the pangolins to finish, with all the calm of creatures who’d done this dozens of times.

Spiral Moon finally stepped forward.

“Thank you,” he said to Quiet and the other gibbons. “I think we understand. To unite the kingdom and heal the Dragon, the three Speakers must part ways and lead the other creatures somewhere.”

“Split into three!” Shiver said. “I understand it now! Three groups of creatures, each one following a Speaker. Right?”

“That’s right,” said Spiral Moon. “The three Dragons—Light, Dark, and Harmony, each inside its stone—must go with them.”

“But . . . where? Where do they need to lead us?” asked Snowstorm.

Spiral Moon hesitated. He looked at the other pangolins, who frowned and clacked their claws together.

“The eyes,” said Quiet. “We know the eyes of old.”

“What are the *eyes*?” said Shiver. “Is that a place?”

“Three places. Ancient sites that watch over the kingdom. Skull Hill, Egg Rocks, and the Dragon’s Claw.”

“Well, I know Egg Rocks,” Shiver said.

“And we know Skull Hill,” said Spiral Moon. “It’s in the Northern Forest, overlooking the monkeys’ territory.”

Shiver’s spirits rose. “Then there’s only one we don’t know—the Dragon’s Claw. Where is that, Quiet?”

“In the far mountains,” said Quiet. “A pile of stones making a sheltered place looking out over the kingdom. Like the others, it is a place where Speakers have gone to share messages from the Dragon with their panda kin.”

Shiver hesitated. The description sounded strangely familiar.

“I think I might know that place too,” she said. “I think Ghost might have settled there for a while—until Brisk and Sleet drove him out.”

“So what do we do now?” Frost asked. “We need to tell everyone, right?”

“The Speakers most of all,” said Shiver. “We have to find Rain, Ghost, and Leaf. All three of them need to know about this.”

“And we need to spread the word to the other creatures too,” said Snowstorm thoughtfully. “It sounds like if there aren’t enough animals with them, then whatever they have to do won’t work.”

“They’re so far away.” Spiral Moon sighed. “I don’t even know where Leaf went. How can we possibly spread the word fast enough?”

“We will help you,” said Quiet. “We are many, and we are fast. We have not left this valley in a long time, but it seems that now is the time.”

She turned her face to the sky and let out a long, high, note.

“Awa, oha!” she sang. “Join now, Cloud Keepers, one and all for the three! Run and sing the message to the kingdom!”

And through the ashy fog, Shiver heard the voices of the gibbons replying—more and more of them, until the whole valley seemed to reverberate with their song. Dark shapes moved around them, long-limbed gibbons seeming almost to emerge from cracks in the earth itself, until they were surrounded by a crowd of howling white-ringed faces, and then, at a signal Shiver couldn’t hear or see, they scattered in all directions, still singing as they swung and scampered away.

“Good luck,” said Quiet, and laid a hand on Spiral Moon’s head. “To all of us.”

And then, with a final hoot, she was gone.

Chapter Nine

THE WOLVES LUNGED, SNAPPING at the heels of Nightwalker, Leaf, and Dasher. Nightwalker circled and spun around Leaf, keeping the wolves just nervous enough to prevent them piling on, but every moment they crept closer and closer.

"Stay behind me!" the tiger growled, twisting like a snake to bring a powerful paw down on the head of a wolf that was salivating a little too close to Dasher. The wolf yelped and backed off, blood trickling from a claw mark across the top of its skull. But even as it did, Leaf felt hot breath on her side and turned just in time as another wolf tried to take a bite out of her flank. She shouldered it aside, but it was a clumsy shove, and the wolf was up on its paws again in moments. Nightwalker moved as if to follow up Leaf's barging with a claw attack of her own, but was forced to turn back to defend Dasher again.

How long? Leaf wondered, her head still spinning from her long sickness. *How long can we survive this? She's just one tiger, and I'm no match for even one wolf like this. . . .*

Dasher himself was panicking, frozen with terror, his paws curled into his chest, his whole body trembling.

"Stay with me, please," Leaf whispered into his ear. "Don't give up!"

Two more wolves were flanking Nightwalker now, drawing her away from them paw step by paw step, and Leaf met the eyes of another as it moved in to slink between them, cutting them off.

"I've got the easy pickings now," he sneered. His voice shook with excitement.

Nightwalker startled and looked back, and Leaf saw the anguish in her deep yellow eyes as she realized the danger they were in.

"Speaker!" she gasped. "No!"

Hearing Nightwalker call her by her title—her true title, the one she had been born for—stunned Leaf. Her skin tingled, and she was aware of the forest around her; the shadows of leaves dancing on the ground, the snapping of wolves. It was like she had dived into freezing water. There

was a plummeting sensation in her stomach, like the one that she'd felt in her dream when she'd fallen from the Dragon's neck—and then the same sense of being gently caught and buoyed up on the Dragon's coils.

"Stop this!" she yelled, striding forward toward the closest wolf. She felt as if she had grown by several paw-lengths. "In the name of the Great Dragon! I am Leaf, the Dragon Speaker, and you will leave me and my companions alone!"

She reared up on her hind legs, holding the green stone in her paw. It flashed black, and for a moment absolute darkness fell all around her, leaving Leaf standing alone in a patch of gray moonlight.

The wolves yelped and howled with surprise, and as the light slowly returned to the forest, Leaf saw them standing with their ears pushed back, looking around in surprise and concern, but no longer advancing. The ones that had closed in around Nightwalker took a few stumbling steps back. She growled and snapped at them as she retreated to Leaf's side.

For a moment the wolves stood in silence, panting and staring at Leaf. Then one of them stepped forward gingerly, on shaking paws.

"D-Dragon Speaker," she said. "Please, forgive us."

She lay down on her belly, then rolled over, exposing the furry hollow between her ribs. Leaf caught her breath as she realized just how starved the wolves must be—and how important it was that, despite that, their leader had shown her belly to a bear and a tiger.

"I forgive you," she said. "I understand that you were only following your nature. But what has happened to you? Why are you so hungry? Is this not your territory?"

The wolf leader got to her paws again, a little clumsily. "Our hunting grounds were all but destroyed," she said. "Red-hot rock started to swell out of the ground, like tiny burning rivers! They were small, so small we wouldn't even have noticed them if they'd been streams of water, but the heat and the smoke were unbearable, the plants withered and died, and if anything touched one of the rivers . . . well, you might have seen for yourself what happens. It was bad. All the prey creatures fled, and our pack was lucky to escape. But everywhere we go, the bad rock seems to have gotten there first."

"The weaker we get, the harder it is to hunt," said another wolf.

"And then we were tricked by a monkey," a third one added with a growl. "The one they call Crookedclaw. She promised us easy prey, but she

didn’t tell us they were also monkeys and would be able to outrun us!”

“We would have caught them,” rumbled another, under his breath, “if they hadn’t escaped into some bamboo. . . .”

Leaf felt movement at her paws as Dasher got up, still trembling slightly. He looked up at Leaf and then over at the wolves. He said nothing, but Leaf could tell that he wanted them to leave—and wouldn’t especially mind if they found somewhere to lie down and starve.

But that wasn’t right. Leaf was the Speaker for the predators and the prey. There had to be balance. She felt the coils of the Dark Dragon around her again.

“Go to the Southern Forest,” Leaf said. “Find my sister, Dragon Speaker Rain. She will help you with a safe place to camp until things are more settled. Tell her that I sent you, and that I said . . .” She hesitated. What could she say to her sister, who she’d last seen before she abandoned her duties, who she’d always accused of not pulling her weight? “That I knew she’d be able to look after you.”

“Thank you, Speaker,” said the wolf leader. “We have not earned this kindness, and we will be sure to repay you if you ever call on us.”

The wolf turned, and with a flick of her tail she summoned the others to her, and they began to make their way down the hillside until they were lost in the darkness.

“You did it!” squeaked Dasher. “Leaf, are you all right now?”

Leaf leaned down and gave him an affectionate nuzzle on the top of his head.

When the darkness had lifted from the wolves, it had lifted from the whole world. A break in the ashy clouds let the moonlight shine down on the hillside, and Leaf could see clearly for the first time in days. She felt strong enough to walk, and the urge to lie down and slip back into fitful dreams was gone.

“Dragon Speaker,” said Nightwalker, lying down on her belly and touching her chin to her paws—not quite the belly-up motion of submission the wolf leader had shown, but Leaf understood that it was a gesture of loyalty and comfort.

“I proved myself to the Dark Dragon,” Leaf said. “I am a Dragon Speaker again. Now, do either you two know what on earth is going on?”

Chapter Ten

THERE WAS NO TIME to get back to Lychee's nest, so Rain rolled in monkey dung to disguise her scent.

This had better be worth it, she thought, wrinkling her nose at the sickly, rotten stench. Of course it was—it had to be. She simply *had* to get close enough to do something about Brawnshanks, and soon. But the dung was still absolutely revolting. Monkeys would eat *anything*.

Rays of light pierced the air in between the still-rolling clouds of ash and smoke like the claws of a tiger coming out to rake across the Northern Forest. Rain picked up her secret weapon and headed back into the heart of the Broken Forest.

Brawnshanks was still on his rock promontory overlooking the place that had once been the entrance to the underground tunnels. Rain suddenly wondered whether he was able to move far even if he wanted to—those stones in his belly *must* be having an effect on him, especially the one that was actually just a rock.

She tried to walk up confidently, but the Strong Arms blocked her.

"Where are you going, Lychee the Desperate?" said Silvermane. "Did you dispose of the traitors or not?"

Rain gave her the most annoyed-Lychee look she could muster. "I don't answer to you," she said. "I need to talk to Brawnshanks."

"He's busy." Silvermane jabbed Rain in the nose with one long monkey finger. "Pandas are nothing now. Soon the monkeys will rule the whole kingdom. You can wait your turn."

I can't wait anymore. I just can't.

Rain put her face right up in Silvermane's and growled, letting her see close up what she was carrying in her jaws. "Let me through, or you'll regret it."

Silvermane growled back, her small pointy teeth bared. "You don't scare me, you big lump!" She slashed Rain's face with her fingernails—not that hard, not even breaking the skin beneath Rain's thick fur, but Rain had

had enough. She tossed her head and barged into Silvermane, sending her sprawling.

Two more Strong Arms leaped to intercept her, chittering and howling in her face, and Rain reared up and aimed an angry paw at one of them, knocking it to the ground with a small but bloody claw mark on the back of its head.

“Stop this! At once!” came a commanding voice, and Crookedclaw shoved the remaining Strong Arm aside to face Rain herself.

Rain hesitated. Her blood was running hot in her veins, and she wished she could simply bite into Crookedclaw and toss her aside—but more Strong Arms were gathering, and Crookedclaw was looking at her with a mixture of anger and thoughtfulness that Rain didn’t like at all. That look threw cold water over her temper at once.

“What is the meaning of this . . . Lychee?” Crookedclaw snarled.

Had she really paused before saying Lychee’s name? Or was that Rain’s imagination? Rain felt embarrassment crawl under her fur, and she tried to think about how Lychee would react, but it was hard with Crookedclaw staring her down.

“I must see Brawnshanks,” she said at last. “These . . . *ginkgo-brains* were trying to delay me.” She put on her smoothest, most self-satisfied Lychee voice.

“Is that all?” said Crookdclaw. “Idiots, all of you. Come, then. Follow me.”

She turned to lead Rain up to Brawnshanks’s rock.

“Are you sure about this?” hissed Silvermane. Crookedclaw looked back and gave the old Strong Arm a glare that said *don’t question me*, and Silvermane drew away, nursing her shoulder where she’d smacked it when she fell.

Rain followed Crookedclaw, suddenly apprehensive about what she might find at the top of the slope.

At first Brawnshanks seemed no different from the last time she’d seen him. He was sitting with his head resting on his hand as if in deep thought, moving stones around in front of him. Rain thought he might be planning something, maybe an attack, and she stared at the stones trying to guess what their meaning was. Then Brawnshanks nodded as if someone had spoken and got up, grabbing one of the rocks in his hand.

“Rain!” he said, and Rain startled and almost dropped her secret weapon. Brawnshanks held the rock out, as if showing it to Rain . . . or showing Rain to it. “Look! Here’s your beloved Lychee!” He chuckled to himself and looked down, and Rain realized that he was, in fact, talking to the rock. “He’s a stupid panda, they’re all stupid pandas, but you, you were the most troublesome of them all. Almost like a monkey. Not like these two! Ghost, the brute”—he kicked over one of the rocks—“or Leaf, the weakling!” He kicked over the other.

Rain stared at him as he bent over the fallen rocks, pointing and laughing, as if he had the real Ghost and Leaf there at his mercy. She risked a glance at Crookedclaw, whose face was calm and placid. If she had any thoughts at all about this, Rain couldn’t read them on her face.

“But now you’re gone, Rain! All gone! Ha-ha!” Brawnshanks crowed, and he drew back his arm and threw the Rain rock as hard as he could. It bounced and rolled down the slope and almost hit one of the Strong Arms who was patrolling below. He glared after it, and the Strong Arm looked nervous for a moment before breaking into whoops and cheers. A few more joined in, but they stopped as soon as Brawnshanks looked away, satisfied.

“Brawnshanks,” said Crookedclaw, “Lychee is here to see you.”

“I can see him,” sniffed Brawnshanks. “I’m not blind. What do you want, panda? Have you done as I asked and destroyed that brute Ghost?” He seized up the Ghost stone and held it excitedly in front of him.

“I have,” said Rain.

“And what proof have you brought us?” asked Crookedclaw.

Rain blinked smugly at her. She knew that Crookedclaw wouldn’t let her get away with this on just her word, even if Brawnshanks was slowly becoming too crazy to care. It was time for her secret weapon. She dropped it on the ground and rolled it toward Brawnshanks with a casual flick of her paw.

He bent down and picked it up.

“I bring one of his leg bones,” she said. “See where it’s been burned? I tricked the simple brute into falling into the lava. After a while, this bone was all I could retrieve.”

She waited, her heart in her throat.

It was a bone—she wasn’t sure if it was a leg bone or even a panda bone, but it was big enough that she thought it looked about right. She’d discovered it in the undergrowth, the leavings of some predator or other.

She’d found the smallest patch of trickling black-coated lava that she could, and gingerly held the end of bone against the surface until it sparked and fizzled, and then she’d run for her life. What she’d ended up with was a large, scorched bone.

Brawnshanks turned it over in his hand, looked from it to the Ghost rock and back, and then let out a wild whoop of victory and tossed the rock after the one he’d called Rain.

“Goodbye, freak!” he called after it. “Good riddance! And good work, Lychee, my friend.”

To Rain’s alarm, Brawnshanks ran over and threw an arm over her shoulders.

“You have proved yourself—yes, you have,” he said. This close up his eyes seemed to have an odd rainbow sheen that reminded Rain of the shimmer given off by her stone, when the third Dragon had been pointing her toward where she needed to go. It was as if her stone were shining out from behind Brawnshanks’s eyes, though now its rainbow light looked sickly and wrong. She tried not to recoil.

“You will be by my side when I rule the Bamboo Kingdom,” Brawnshanks went on, digging his fingers into the fur on Rain’s head and scratching in a way Rain thought was probably meant to be affectionate. “Maybe I will even give you the pandas to rule after all, if any survive! Maybe. But don’t ask me. Who knows what the Dragon Monkey will do? The Dragon Monkey will see all and know all, and it will do what it will—yes, it will. It will what it will.” He paused. Rain thought he might have confused himself.

Then Brawnshanks turned to the last remaining stone. He let go of Rain’s neck, and instead of picking up the rock, he brought his face down to its level with a triumphant grin.

“What do you think of *that*, eh, Leaf?” he said. “Rain and Ghost are gone! You are the last one, and when I find you, oh *ho*, I will make sure you know you’re all alone before the end, yes, oh yes. . . .”

Having the stone inside him is confusing his thoughts, Rain thought. *He doesn’t know fantasy from reality.*

“Leave me,” Brawnshanks said, waving a hand toward Rain and Crookedclaw and the couple of Strong Arms who’d followed them up to the top of the rock. “Leaf and I have business to discuss. Oh, and Lychee,” he added, before Rain could turn to leave. “You stay too. I want a word alone.”

“Brawnshanks,” said Crookedclaw, “are you sure—”

“Alone!” He turned on her and screamed the word in her face. Rain jumped, and so did the Strong Arms, but Crookedclaw’s face *still* stayed calm. Then Brawnshanks straightened up and went back to his rock, as if nothing had happened.

Rain thought she caught sight of one of Crookedclaw’s eyes twitching, just a little, as she watched him. It sent a shiver down Rain’s back.

“Very well,” she said. “Come.” And she turned and left Rain and Brawnshanks alone on the top of the hill.

Is this my chance? Rain wondered. *Can I deal with him here and now?*

Except . . . the only way to deal with him and get her stone back was to tear him open. Even if she was resigned to it, she was pretty sure she couldn’t do it quietly, and maybe not quickly, and if she came running down the hill with blood on her muzzle and the stone in her paw . . .

As much as it stung her, it might still be better to hear him out right now, instead of tearing him limb from limb. She just hoped he had something to say that wasn’t completely nonsensical.

He waited until the others were gone, and then Brawnshanks beckoned Rain over, closer and closer, until they were standing almost pressed together, looking out over the smoldering Broken Forest.

“All this will be ours,” he said.

Rain tried not to make a sound—she wasn’t sure if she wanted to laugh or to scoff in disgust. In all honesty, she couldn’t figure out why he wanted to rule a kingdom at all, let alone one he’d devastated along the way. But Lychee would have understood it, or at least pretended to, so she just nodded.

“I have another task for you, my friend,” said Brawnshanks. “Crookedclaw.”

Rain’s blood ran cold.

“What about her?” she asked. *He can’t be saying what I think he’s saying . . . ?*

“Put her in the lava too. Not now—not yet—I have a few things I need her for first. But soon. Can you do that for me, Lychee? King of the Pandas?”

Absolutely not, Rain thought. *Are you kidding? I’m much more scared of her than I am of you, and I’ve been working up to destroying you for days.*

“Absolutely,” she said. “I’ll be ready to follow the Dragon Monkey’s command. Just give me the signal when she’s outlived her usefulness.”

“Good,” said Brawnshanks. “Good. Now go. Don’t want her to suspect.”

Rain hurried away, feeling both intensely relieved and embarrassed that she wasn’t brave or foolhardy enough to simply end all their troubles right then and there.

She needed to share her thoughts with someone. After walking circles around the forest for a while, checking she wasn’t being followed by any monkeys, she made her way at sunset to where she’d left Ghost and Lychee. Ghost would know what to do—maybe. Or maybe he’d be able to say something to her that would make tearing Brawnshanks apart easier to do. . . .

But she met Ghost alone before she got to the river, hurrying along the path to the Broken Forest, and her heart sank.

“Ghost,” she said, “what’s wrong? What’s happened?” She didn’t bother reminding him that if the monkeys saw him, then her lie would be exposed. Something told her it was already too late for that. . . .

“Lychee escaped,” said Ghost. “That lying dung-brain made me think he was harmless, and then—look.” He bowed his head, and Rain winced as she saw that there was a swollen, bloodstained lump sticking up from his skull. “He hit me. With a rock. When I find him, I really am going to kill him. . . .”

“But if the monkeys find him first, then my disguise is for nothing,” Rain said distantly. She felt as if the ground under her feet had been taken away and she was treading air the way she would tread water. “They’ll know—and they might know I’ve been pretending for days. We have to catch him.”

“I’ve searched as much of the Northern Forest as I could,” Ghost said. “And I made sure Peony and the others know he’s on the loose and they should capture him if they can.”

“Good,” said Rain. She wished she could believe he’d run off to the Southern Forest, perhaps to hide away where he could do no harm. She even let herself entertain a fantasy that he’d meet Blossom and Ginseng and they would take the opportunity to vent their frustrations on someone who’d wronged Rain for once.

But far more likely he was here somewhere, in the Northern Forest, planning to make trouble—for Rain or for Brawnshanks, she wasn't sure if he cared which.

Ghost said he'd tracked Lychee's scent a little way back on the path, but he'd lost it again. So together they plunged into the undergrowth, sniffing at trees, scanning the ground for paw prints, trying not to trample on their own clues. Rain was suddenly glad she no longer smelled like Lychee—it meant that when she caught a whiff from a patch of crushed ferns, she knew it had to be him. She called for Ghost, and together they tried to track the scent. They found a place where bamboo canes had been growing, now torn down and consumed, only a few thin strips left to show where the panda had passed by.

After that they followed the scent up a slope and, cautiously, out onto an open rocky hillside that led down into a valley. And there the scent ended, smothered in the stink from a patch of lava. Rain couldn't see it at first, though she felt the heat on her face as soon as she emerged from the trees—at the edge of the shelf she looked down, and the waves of heat made her close her eyes quickly. Sure enough, when she took a quick peek, there was another trail of ashen black rock that had split to reveal a hideous orange glow beneath.

"If he went down there, we can't follow him the same way," Ghost gasped, turning his muzzle away from the hot air.

"I know," said Rain. "I'm not going near that stuff again—not for Lychee, anyway."

She sighed and sat down, exhaustion suddenly numbing her paws. She hadn't slept all day.

"I have to go back," she said.

"Don't," said Ghost at once. "It's too dangerous now that Lychee's wandering around here somewhere. He'll blow your cover just by strolling into the wrong part of the forest, let alone trying whatever stupid plan he thinks he's got in his thick head."

Rain smiled a little despite her tiredness. It was nice listening to her brother insult Lychee. She wished she could stay and listen to it all night.

"But if I'm mysteriously gone, that's no good either," she said. "I have to get my stone back before they find him, that's all."

Ghost sighed, and he touched his nose to hers.

“Be careful, Rain,” he said. “I have a feeling this is going to end badly for Lychee—don’t let the same happen to you. . . .”

Chapter Eleven

IT WAS A LONG journey to the White Spine Mountains, but Shiver had crossed the distance several times this season, and it was almost beginning to feel familiar. There were landmarks she could look out for, and the farther north and the higher the snow leopards climbed, the clearer the air became. The feeling of rising above the treetops and hills of the Northern Forest and seeing the white snowfields ahead was like meeting an old friend for the first time in a long while.

"Where do we go now?" Snowstorm asked, as Shiver paused at the crest of a rocky hillside to sniff the air and take in the landscape around her. Snowstorm cast a worried glance back down toward the Northern Forest, and Shiver followed her gaze. The Broken Forest was a mass of ash and smoke, and its tendrils were spreading in all directions, in places almost reaching the river.

She turned away, focusing on the land of snow and rock in front of her instead of the burning mess she had come from.

It was strange to be the one leading the way instead of trailing behind, since now she was crossing the mountains—their home—with her two bigger, fitter siblings. They could no longer treat her like the runt of the litter—if they were going to find their way to the Dragon's Claw in time, they had to go at her pace and listen to her instructions. If things had been less serious, they might have complained and joked about it all the way, but with the smoke rising behind them, they hadn't made a single comment.

It had been a hard choice to make, deciding what to do about the gibbons' prophecy. They had talked about it for a long time, and when one of the pangolins had mentioned the stones of the Dragon's Claw and their special positions, Shiver had remembered. The Claw wasn't in position anymore—Brisk and Sleet had brought it down to prevent Ghost from using it to contact Rain or anyone else. And if he couldn't use it like that, Shiver was willing to bet there was no use leading a third of the animals in the kingdom to it. It had to be fixed somehow.

So the pangolins had stayed behind to help spread the word to the other creatures, and the three snow leopards had set off for the mountains as fast as their tired paws would take them.

“We need to head that way,” Shiver said. “Do you see that shadow in the snow? That’s a small pine forest. It’s beyond there.”

“You’re sure it’s the right one?” asked Frost, squinting. “Lots of pine forests in the mountains.”

“Just follow me,” said Shiver, rolling her eyes.

They slept in a hollow beneath the roots of a great twisted pine tree and arrived at the Dragon’s Claw just as the sun was rising. The tower of earth and stones still lay in ruins: rocks of all sizes had tumbled in on themselves and some of them scattered down the snowy hillside when they had fallen and rolled away. Shiver sniffed around it, but there were no scents to pick up—the scent of Brisk and Sleet was long faded, and so was Ghost’s, and her own.

“Those are . . . big stones,” said Snowstorm. “Are you sure we can even fix this?”

“We have to try,” said Shiver. She picked her way to the center of the rock formation and found the stone that had once lain on top of the others, forming a sort of cavern roof for the comfortable space inside. It had fallen down into the soft bedding where Ghost had slept, and a thick layer of snow had covered it. She would move this one first—perhaps she could tip it on its side and roll it out of the space—and think about how to get it back on top later.

She circled it, padding down the snow with her paws and swishing at it with her tail, until she decided which angle to try first; then she bent over, put her shoulder against the side of the rock, and shoved with all her might.

The rock shifted, and for a moment Shiver’s heart was full of triumph and excitement. They could do this!

Then the rock came to a halt, and no matter how hard she pushed, it wouldn’t move another whisker.

“Well? Come and help me!” she panted, and her littermates hurried over and tried to help, pushing with their front paws, kicking with their back ones. Frost even pressed his head to the side of the rock and scrabbled at the ground until he’d dug a ditch in the snow.

The rock didn’t move.

Snowstorm backed away and hissed at the air. “Snow Cat curse Brisk and Sleet! It’s much easier to destroy something than it is to build it.”

“Well, they didn’t like falling rocks so much by the end, did they?” said Frost darkly.

“What do we do now, Shiver?” Snowstorm asked.

Shiver stared at the rock, trying to think. “We can’t move it alone, but it must move. So . . . we need help.”

She looked up, inspiration striking like a warm sunbeam.

“We need lots of help, lots of creatures—strong ones that know how to work together. I know exactly who we need to find! You two stay here, guard the Claw. I’ll be back.”

She sprang over the rock and onto the snowy slope.

She didn’t really need her littermates to guard the rocks—after all, they’d just made sure they weren’t going anywhere on their own. No, the reason she needed them to stay behind was that three snow leopards charging across the hillside might well give her intended allies second thoughts about helping them. . . .

It wasn’t too hard to find the flock of blue sheep. She remembered where Ghost had advised them to look for new grazing, and sure enough, in a small sheltered valley where grass grew up through the dusting of snow, she spotted the fluffy creatures milling around in little groups, chewing and talking together.

She descended into the valley with absolutely no attempt at stealth, walking slowly, keeping her head up and her tail calmly down by her paws. The first blue sheep to spot her seemed almost to have a heart attack, and its hooves skidded in the snow as it leaped to shove its friends.

“Look out!” it bleated. “Leopard!”

“Hello,” Shiver called out. “Please, is Cozy with you?”

“It knows our names!” one of the sheep gasped.

“I come on behalf of the Dragon Speakers,” Shiver said. “Please, don’t run. I won’t chase you, or hurt you in any way. I need to talk to Cozy.”

The sheep looked at each other, and then one of them nudged another, and it ran off while the others stayed behind and formed a sort of fluffy wall, staring Shiver down. A moment later the one who had left returned with a young female following it. Shiver recognized her, and to her relief Cozy’s eyes widened with recognition, not fear, when she saw Shiver.

“She’s telling the truth,” said Cozy. “This is the leopard that was with Ghost. She really does know a Dragon Speaker.”

“Ghost helped you,” Shiver said. “And now he desperately needs your help in return. And any other herd animals you know, especially the strong ones. I need you to come and move some rocks.”

Some of the sheep snorted, but Cozy looked thoughtful. “I know where the oxen are grazing,” she said. “And some golden takins passed through not too long ago. I could go and find them.”

“Please,” said Shiver. The rest of the sheep were wandering over, seemingly not wanting to be left out of anything exciting. “We’re trying to put the Dragon’s Claw back together, but the stones are too heavy for us.”

“Is Ghost with you?” asked one of the sheep. “I know we sent him away when he was last here, but I’ve got this ache in my back. . . .”

“No, Ghost is busy,” said Shiver. “But my other littermates—Snowstorm and Frost Born of Winter—they’re here, and they’re trying to help.”

“Are they bears or leopards?” asked an elderly sheep.

“Leopards,” said Shiver. “But they won’t harm any of you. They’re on a mission from the Dragon. We’re just here to restore the Dragon’s Claw so that Ghost can use it to reunite the Dragon.”

“What on earth do you mean, ‘reunite the Dragon’?” said Cozy, and then she shook her head. “Never mind. You can tell us later.”

Before the sun had passed its high point, Shiver found herself keeping watch while a gang of herd animals set to work moving the stones of the Dragon’s Claw. The oxen and the takins dug their thick horns underneath the stones to lift them, and then the sheep helped push, and some of them stood crammed together side by side to prop up parts of the Claw until one of the leopards could come in and dig a pit to tip it into or pile up snow beside it.

It was wonderful to watch them work, at first. Then suddenly Shiver thought she smelled smoke on the air. She looked out toward the Northern Forest, worried that the ash cloud had traveled all the way into the mountains, but she couldn’t see anything. . . .

“Hey,” snapped a takin. “This goes that way, not *that* way!” He head-butted the ox beside him, who gave a grunt.

“What’re you talking about?” The ox’s voice resonated low in his chest. “It’s *this* way!”

Shiver was about to go over and see if she could remember which was right, when she heard another pair of voices bickering on the other side of the rock formation.

“Not like that, wool-for-brains,” snapped one of the sheep. “You’ll never move it like that!”

“Have you been eating bad mushrooms? Put it down, put it down!”

Shiver turned again, just in time to catch one of the oxen lifting a stone up into the air, propped up on its huge horns. The ox next to it was yelling in dismay, and sure enough, the first ox unbalanced and the stone fell, narrowly missing landing right on top of one of the blue sheep.

“What is going on?” Snowstorm asked Shiver as yet more arguments broke out all across the slope. Two blue sheep backed up and put their heads down as if to charge each other. A takin and an ox barged into each other’s shoulders and immediately started to blame each other, when Shiver thought they had *both* done it on purpose.

“What’s wrong with them? I thought you said herd animals would be good at working together!”

“They should be . . . I think,” said Shiver. Could she have been wrong? Or . . . was it something else? What could have turned all these creatures against each other in one moment?

She had smelled smoke before the first argument broke out. She looked over the Northern Forest once more, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. There was still nothing to see, but something told her that the influence of Brawnshanks was at work here anyway.

“The Harmony Dragon, the gibbons said,” she muttered.

“Not much harmony at work here,” said Frost.

Shiver’s tail twitched. “That’s exactly it. The Harmony Dragon is in Rain’s stone, and that’s the one Brawnshanks still has. What if he’s using it against us? Or if Brawnshanks’s having it is corrupting its power over the kingdom?”

Snowstorm looked around at the bickering herd animals and dodged out of the way as one of the takins almost trod on her tail as it stormed away from its friends.

“All right, I can imagine that,” she said. “So what do we do about it?”

Shiver took a deep breath. “We just have to . . . er . . . Well, maybe if we explain it to them?”

“Good luck,” said Frost.

Shiver jumped up onto one of the piles of stones.

“Hey!” grunted an ox. “I was just about to move that!”

“Everyone, listen to me!” Shiver called out. Thankfully, this seemed strange enough—perhaps annoying enough—that every creature on the snowfield looked around, and most of them started to gather near Shiver. “None of you were arguing a few moments ago, were you?” she said. She didn’t wait for them to reply—she was fairly sure they would just argue with her. “I think our minds are being affected by the corruption of the Great Dragon. We have to work together, even if we feel annoyed by each other. You’re herd animals—I know you know how to do it.”

“What’s happening to the Dragon?” asked one of the sheep. “You said something about reuniting?”

Shiver took a deep breath. “You’re right.” And without waiting for any more interruptions, she launched into the shortest version of the story she could come up with—how the monkeys had split the Dragon in three, and now the Speakers had to bring it together again, but the monkeys still had part of the Dragon, and they were twisting it to their own ends.

“I think that’s what’s making us argue,” she said. “So how about this. . . .”

She counted out groups of four—an ox, a takin, and two sheep in each group—and an extra group of five leftover sheep. “You’re a team now,” she said. “Take a stone each; focus on one job at a time. And if you have the urge to fight, just remember: Brawnshanks is to blame for your bad mood, and the faster we get this done, the worse it’ll be for him!”

There was still some grumbling among the herd creatures as they grouped together and picked their stones—but Shiver’s mood lifted as she heard that while there was still some cursing, most of them were cursing Brawnshanks and not each other.

“Clever,” smirked Snowstorm.

“Lucky,” Shiver replied, leaping down so that a takin and a pair of sheep could begin to push the stone she’d been standing on.

The work went faster after that, but it was still hard, and the animals had to take frequent breaks to cool down, rolling in the snow and trooping off to find grass to graze on. Shiver, Snowstorm, and Frost were helping tread

down the snow beside some of the stones so that they'd slide more easily across the ground, when Shiver looked up and saw three moving shapes on the edge of the snowfield. They were dark and small, and they didn't move like herd animals or like snow leopards.

"I'll be back in a moment," she told her littermates, and she walked away from the Dragon's Claw, crossing the glittering snow until she could see the shapes more clearly. "Well, knock me down with a crane feather," she gasped as they came into focus. "It's you!"

The three creatures were bears—like pandas, but smaller and thinner, and all dark brown except for an orange crescent across their chests. These were the sun bears, who she'd last seen a long time ago, with her siblings and Ghost.

It had been the first time Ghost had seen another bear. He hadn't recognized himself in them, but the sun bears had known he was like them. And a good thing, too, since they'd been starving, and otherwise they would have tried to eat the Cubs Born of Winter, even though they wouldn't have been an easy kill.

"Obsidian," Shiver said as the bears came closer. "Pumice, Shale. Do you remember me?"

Pumice looked at her mate and her cub, and then at Shiver, the light of recognition in her eyes.

"I do," she said. "You were with that little white bear. I've long wondered what happened to him after he met us."

"It's a long story," Shiver said. "But . . . he's a Dragon Speaker."

The bears stared at her, and then the older male, Obsidian, began to laugh. "I don't know why," he said, "but I don't feel particularly surprised! Is that strange? There was something about him, even then."

"I hope things have improved for you," Shiver said. "And I also hope you can help me. We're fixing something that was broken, so that Ghost can perform his duties—it's actually a much longer story, but I can tell it as we work, if you're willing to help."

"We'd be happy to," said Pumice.

The sun bears passed Shiver and headed for the Dragon's Claw, where Snowstorm and Frost stood among the busy herd animals. Shiver watched for trouble, but there was none, or at least none that seemed to disrupt the work. She beamed with pride as she stood for a moment and saw that half the stones had already been replaced in their original positions and many

others dragged away from where they'd fallen, up the slope of the hill, so that they could be put down on top of the rest and recreate the Speaker's hollow. And all despite the ill wind from the south.

We can do this, she thought. *We actually can.*

She began to follow the sun bears, but she had to tread carefully through a deep patch of snow that she knew hid a sharp rock, so she looked down at her paws. And as she did, she noticed something strange.

There were paw prints in the snow. On its own, that was not so odd—she had been walking back and forth, after all, and the bears had left their prints ahead of her too.

But these were different. They were cat prints, and they seemed to lead away from her and then veer off, downhill, and vanish over the edge of a sharp dip in the field. She felt eerily as if she was looking at her own paw prints before she had made them. The sun glinted on the snow and cast sharp shadows into the little hollows. The prints appeared to almost glow a cold blue against the white snow.

She looked behind her, just to check, but only confirmed what she expected to see—the prints began at her own feet: There were no mysterious prints coming down the hill behind her and crossing her path.

Strange paw prints, she thought. She'd heard of such a thing before, and after a moment's thought she suddenly remembered: *Ghost. He said the Snow Cat had once led him to prey. Is this the Snow Cat? Is it leading me somewhere?*

I have to follow.

She glanced back toward her littermates, who were now busy greeting the sun bears and not looking in her direction.

I won't be long, she thought. *I'll be back soon. I have to go.*

She turned and followed the mysterious paw prints, careful not to step on top of them as she descended the slope. Where it bent more steeply, and the paw prints had vanished from view farther up, she found herself looking down a short snowbank to the edge of a copse of fir trees. The paw prints led up to the trees, and then she wasn't sure if they vanished or if they carried on between the firs. With a slight shudder she scrambled down.

As soon as she stepped between the first of the firs, she had a strange feeling, as if she had stepped into a dream. The firs, the glittering snow, the icy cold . . . it all felt oddly *perfect,* as if she had been asked to imagine what the ideal version of a place like this could be. Soft, icy mist drifted

between the trees, thin coatings of snow clung to all the branches, and everything gleamed like ice in sunlight, even the parts that should have been in shadow. As she passed beneath the trees, icicles dangled around her and reflected the slanting sunlight, and tiny white flowers grew in small clumps around the roots of the trees.

The paw prints were still visible, and Shiver followed them, her heart feeling strangely full and warm despite the freezing air. Whoever or whatever had led her to this place—whether it was the Snow Cat or the Great Dragon or something else altogether—she knew it would not hurt her; as she walked beneath the trees, she felt a love and a sense of safety that she had not felt since . . .

Since the last time she had curled up against her mother's chest, buried in the softest and thickest fur of any snow leopard, and fallen asleep with the gentle sound of Winter's breath rising and falling nearby.

Shiver looked up, and she knew who she was here to see.

Swirling snowflakes drifted between two trees, a flurry passing by, barely obscuring the forest beyond—and when they were gone, Winter stood there, her fur glistening with the same eerily beautiful light as the snow and the icicles.

Shiver broke into a run.

Chapter Twelve

"So I ended up taking care of the Dark Dragon inside my stone," said Leaf, summarizing, partly to give Dasher a chance to catch his breath. He'd been telling her the story of everything that had happened to him with the golden monkeys after she'd left the red pandas on the cliff side. "And Ghost's stone is the Light Dragon. And . . . Rain . . . ?"

"I don't know exactly what it is," Dasher admitted. "The third Dragon. What is there besides dark and light? But I hope it's helping her figure out who really killed Pebble. Nimbletail is sure it was Lychee. Lychee betrayed Nimbletail to Brawnshanks, and she thinks he's dangerous," he said.

Leaf had been in the middle of clambering over a small cliff of wet rocks, and she got stuck for a second, kicking her back legs, as this news sank in. She wiggled up onto the rock and looked down at Dasher.

"But I thought Lychee was . . . I mean I thought he . . . oh Dragon, poor Rain!" Leaf shook her head. "I should never have left!"

Nightwalker appeared at the top of the cliff and gave her a firm stare. "You said you were going to stop saying that."

"I know," said Leaf, reaching a paw down to let Dasher climb over her shoulder. "There's no point dwelling on what went wrong; we have to find a way to fix it. It's just that such a lot went wrong. . . ."

Dasher and Nightwalker finished telling her all about the monkeys, and about Brawnshanks's plan to get hold of all the stones, as they made their way north. It was clear to Leaf, and to the others, that the first thing they had to do was find Ghost and Rain.

"I thought we were free," Leaf muttered to herself, "after we defeated Dusk and took our places as Dragon Speakers. . . . But it wasn't over. It was Brawnshanks all along, pushing Dusk into doing some of the things he did. And it won't end until Brawnshanks is dealt with."

"That's right," said Nightwalker. She was sitting up on her haunches, sniffing the air. "So first we need to . . . to find . . ." She trailed off, and paused for so long that Leaf thought she had completely forgotten what she was saying.

“Nightwalker, are you all right?” she asked. “Are you tired?”

“I am,” said Nightwalker. “But that is not . . . I . . . I’m sorry, it’s nothing.”

But she didn’t act like it was nothing. She slowly lowered herself to all four paws, but she didn’t look around or say anything more or even blink for several long seconds.

“Can I help?” Leaf asked, a little timidly.

Nightwalker looked at her, and her eyes seemed like infinitely deep pools, where somewhere in the depths some important truth was lurking.

“I have a . . . feeling. I sense danger. But not from the direction of the other Speakers. I feel the Dragon drawing me on, but I feel . . . snow under my paws again. I think I have to go to the mountains.”

She stopped and shook herself from head to tail, raising her hackles and puffing out her fur so that a small cloud of ash burst from it and settled onto the ground around her.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Leaf. “I will not leave you, if you need me.”

“If you sense danger in the mountains, you should go,” said Leaf at once. Nightwalker gave her a concerned look, but Leaf was firm. “I’m fine, and we know what we’re doing. Sort of. But if the Dragon is trying to tell you to go somewhere, you should listen!”

“You’re right,” said Nightwalker. She hesitated, then pressed her forehead to Leaf’s own. “I am proud of you, Speaker,” she said. “I wanted to be with you when you found your way home, but . . . if that’s not to be, then I know I will see you again soon.”

“Good luck, Nightwalker,” said Leaf. “Be careful, and follow your instincts.”

Nightwalker gave Dasher a swift lick across his head with her huge, rough tongue; Dasher only flinched a tiny bit. Then she set her sights on a far hill to the north, headed away into the trees, and was lost to sight in moments.

Leaf and Dasher pushed on, deeper into the Northern Forest, where the trees were thinner than in the south, and the bamboo sparser. The land was familiar, but also changed—the great fire had swept through here, turning much of the ferns and underbrush to ash, and the trees that had survived were scorched and damaged. The smell of smoke was thick here, even though the ash cloud had rolled away and the sun was shining.

Leaf walked with half an eye on where she was going, but most of her attention was turned to her siblings. Would they forgive her? Would Ghost blame her for everything that had happened since? She had no doubt they would be able to put their differences aside to heal the kingdom—at least she had very little doubt about it. But that wasn't all she wanted. She wanted to be family again. . . .

"Hey, Leaf!" Dasher said suddenly. "Look where we are!"

Leaf looked up, and for a moment she didn't recognize the part of the forest they had come to—but then she realized that she knew the trunks of these trees, the small patches of bamboo growing beside their roots. This was the Slenderwood, where she had grown up with her aunt Plum, who had been murdered by the false Dragon Speaker, Dusk. She imagined she could see Plum now, enjoying the dappled sunshine, gathering bamboo to make sure that their small group always had enough for the Nine Feasts, making sure that Leaf and little Cane knew all about the Dragon and how it would always provide for them if they were faithful.

I can't believe I forgot, Leaf thought. *Forgive me, Aunt Plum. I'm here now, and the Dragon is with me.*

She looked up at the closest tree and saw claw marks on its trunk, ascending up into the canopy.

"Grandfather Ginkgo," she said. "The tallest tree in the forest. It survived the fire, then!" She put her paw up to the bark and felt surprised to see that her paws were bigger than they used to be. She didn't feel like she had grown much.

She wished she had time to climb to the top of Grandfather Ginkgo once again. She'd spent so much time there as a cub, looking out over the kingdom—but mostly she'd been wondering where her mother and her sister had gone, and that was a mystery she'd already solved.

"Let's go," she said to Dasher, but when she turned, she saw him sniffing around the undergrowth with his tail fluffed up and twitching. "Something wrong?"

"No," said Dasher, straightening up with a grin on his face. "I smell Climbing Fars! My family is close by! Come on!" He dashed off, zipping here and there to sniff at different parts of the forest. Leaf followed him, her heart aching slightly. She was so happy to see him reunited with his family—but the last time she had seen the red pandas, she had let them down.

They had followed her into the mountains, and the snow leopards Brisk and Sleet had attacked, killing several of them.

It was right after that that she'd put aside her stone. . . .

"Dasher?" cried a voice overhead. Dasher looked up, jumped up on his little paws, and went running up a trunk and into a tree. Jumper Climbing Far was there, dancing with excitement along the tree branch as Dasher climbed up to him. They rolled and tumbled over each other, barely keeping hold of the branch, until Jumper caught his breath and called out, "Everybody! Dasher's here! He's back!"

"Dasher?" came the reply.

"Dasher's back!"

"Seeker, come quick, it's Dasher!"

Out of the trees all around them, red-panda faces began to appear. They mobbed Dasher with nuzzles and friendly head-butts, and with questions, too. Seeker, Dasher's mother, appeared at a run and leaped from the next tree to the one Dasher was in to lick his face and press her forehead to his. "What happened?" she asked. "Where did you go? We thought you might have been caught in the fires!"

"It's a long story," said Dasher. "I was captured by monkeys and imprisoned next to a lava river, and I held on to the Speaker's stone and the Dark Dragon used its powers through me and I rescued a bunch of pangolins—and I found Leaf!" he finished, with a panting grin, pointing down at her.

The red pandas looked down, and the warm, excited atmosphere of their reunion turned abruptly chilly. Some of the red pandas glared at her, some stared with questioning frowns on their faces, and others simply didn't meet her gaze.

Leaf took a deep, awkward breath.

"I am sorry," she said. "I understand that I have to win your trust again—and the trust of all of the Bamboo Kingdom. But I've made my peace with the Dragon, and I promise, I will never give up on you again."

"She didn't mean to abandon us," Dasher added. "She thought she was doing the right thing."

None of the red pandas answered for a moment. Then Runner Healing Heart, the old red panda whose knowledge of bamboo healing had saved Aunt Plum's life once, climbed down from the tree and put his front paws over Leaf's.

“We know that the snow-leopard attack was not your fault,” he said. Leaf thought she heard a very faint snorting as if some of the red pandas in the trees still didn’t entirely believe this, but when she looked up, she also saw that many of them were nodding.

“You were under a lot of pressure,” said Keeper Swimming Deep. “But we need to know we can come to you if we need a Dragon Speaker.”

“You can,” Leaf said. “And I’m on my way to find my siblings so that I can fix what’s going wrong around here.”

“The ash clouds,” said Seeker.

“And the black and red rivers,” said Racer Climbing Far. “They’re terrible! They make the land around them too hot to walk through, and they set fire to anything they touch!”

“Please, stop them, if you can,” said Runner.

“We’ll do our best,” Leaf said.

“I saw Ghost,” said one of the red pandas, and Leaf startled. She looked up and realized that it was Chaser Digging Deep, a young female cub.

“When?” she said. “Where was he?”

“We saw him searching the forest this morning,” said Breaker Digging Deep, pointing with his nose. “By the—well, it *was* by the big pine tree, but that’s gone now. You shouldn’t be able to miss the stump. It’s not far, two hills over that way.”

“Thank you!” Leaf said. “Dasher . . . if you want to stay . . .”

“Are you kidding? I’m coming with you,” he said, climbing down from the tree at once. “We’ll have plenty of time to catch up after we’ve dealt with Brawnshanks,” he called to the Climbing Fars.

“Good luck!” the red pandas called back as Leaf and Dasher hurried off in the direction that Breaker had pointed. “We’ll see you soon!”

Two hills over. It wasn’t far, and Ghost couldn’t have gone much farther. . . . Leaf’s heart squeezed as she walked, keeping her eyes and her nose and her ears pricked for any sign of her brother. Once she thought she saw a patch of white fur caught on a bush, and her heart leaped, before she remembered it could have been from any panda, or even a red panda, or some other creature altogether.

They found the stump of the old pine on the edge of a hill, in the center of a path of destruction that must have been left by the great fire. Leaf remembered how its trunk had been almost as tall as the Grandfather Ginkgo’s, but twisted and folded in on itself so that its needles spread out

over a wide swath of the hillside. Now the twisted trunk was gone, and only a blackened stump and scorched roots remained to show where it had been. The ferns and bushes on the hillside were gone too, but little green shoots of grass still pushed up through the ash.

Leaf paused beside the stump to get her bearings and catch her breath. Where would Ghost have gone from here? Breaker said he was searching the forest—what was he searching for?

Then, suddenly, against the gray-and-black landscape she saw a glimmer—a small stream of water, running down between two hills. And, beside it, a flash of white fur that passed behind a rock and disappeared.

It could be another panda—it could be anything. But Leaf had to know. She called to Dasher and broke into a run, her paws kicking up ash as she went. She slipped and tumbled, picked herself up and ran on, down into the valley below the burned pine. She found the stream and splashed along it, around the bend of the hillside, until she saw the white figure up ahead.

It *was* Ghost.

She ran toward him, and then as he turned his head to look at what was making the splashing sound, she slithered to a stop, suddenly feeling awkward. For a second he looked at her with shock and suspicion, but then his expression cleared and he spun on his heel and ran toward her.

“Leaf!” he exclaimed. “Thank the Dragon!”

He bundled into her, almost knocking them both down into the stream, and pressed the side of his head to hers.

“I thought something really terrible might have happened!” he said. “I’m sorry about everything I said to you in the mountains—”

“*You’re* sorry?” said Leaf. “I’m sorry! I was awful to you about Pebble, and about everything—”

“I told you that you shouldn’t be a Dragon Speaker,” said Ghost, his ears flattening with shame. “I’ve regretted it every moment since. I didn’t mean it. You were the best of any of us, and I was jealous.”

“Please,” Leaf said. “I don’t see you and Rain giving up your stones and wandering off to get sick and almost die! I’m the one who did that, not you.”

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Ghost chuckled, deep in his chest, and pressed his forehead to Leaf’s.

“You’re here now,” he said. “That’s all that matters.”

“Where’s Rain?” Leaf asked. “Is she still in the Southern Forest? I owe her an apology too.”

Ghost took a deep breath and gave her a stressed look that Leaf didn’t like one bit.

“Is she . . . not in the Southern Forest? Is she all right?”

“I hope so,” said Ghost. “She’s with the golden monkeys.”

Dasher caught up with them, and he was about to wind himself between Ghost’s legs in greeting when he heard Ghost’s words and sat down with a splish in the little stream, looking up in dismay.

“Oh no!” he said. “Is she captured too?”

“Not exactly,” said Ghost. “She’s pretending to be Lychee to get close to Brawnshanks.” Leaf’s dismay must have shown on her face, because Ghost quickly added, “It’s not quite as pika-brained as it sounds—it was actually working really well up until Lychee himself gave me the slip. Now he’s wandering around somewhere in the Northern Forest, and every moment he’s out here alone is another moment when the monkeys could find him and realize Rain’s not who she says she is. I have to find him first. Can you help me?”

“Of course,” said Leaf.

“I’ve found traces of his scent heading this way,” said Ghost, “but I think he was walking in the water to disguise it for a while. We’ll just have to keep looking. It’ll be much easier with three,” he added with a grin and another gentle head-butt against Leaf’s cheek.

They fanned out, with Ghost staying down on the valley floor trying to recapture Lychee’s scent, Dasher scampering up into the trees to see if he could catch a glimpse of him, and Leaf going up and down the hillsides searching for fur or broken bamboo or any other clues that a panda had been this way.

Eventually the valley stream vanished underground, into a hole between two large rocks. Leaf recalled that a little to their right and over another ridge there was a hillside where bamboo grew well, if not in huge amounts—an oddity for the Slenderwood.

“You can almost always find bamboo there, even if it’s only a few canes at a time,” she told Ghost. “We’ll be able to tell if Lychee’s eaten there recently.”

“Let’s go,” Ghost agreed, and together they headed uphill, leaving the stream behind. It was a relatively sparse hillside, without too many trees but

with lots of rocks jutting up between thick patches of ferns. They scrambled up, with Dasher leaping from rock to rock behind them.

As they crested the hill, they found themselves standing in the shadow of a bending cherry tree, and Leaf saw, across the tops of trees and around the jutting miniature forests at the top of rock columns, smoke rising once more from the direction of the Broken Forest. She knew the worst of the destruction was still hidden behind the rolling hillsides of the Northern Forest, but she could see a tendril of ash cloud flowing down one of the valleys, almost like a reaching paw.

"Leaf," said Ghost, a tired dismay in his voice. "Look."

Leaf looked down.

There had been bamboo growing on the hillside. It had been smashed, knocked down, not by the clean biting jaws of a panda but apparently by something crashing into it as it rolled downhill. Leaf peered down the steep slope until she saw, right at the bottom, the hunched, unmoving shape of a creature.

"Oh no," she said. "Is that . . . Lychee?"

They made their way carefully down to him, avoiding the bamboo canes he had struck on his way down—some of the broken stems were tipped with red where they had pierced his skin when he rolled over them.

It was Lychee, and he was dead. His fur was stained with dried brown blood, and his eyes were open and staring.

"I told him," Ghost said quietly. "I said that if he ran off, he'd be in more danger than if he stayed with me. But he wouldn't listen."

Leaf gingerly turned Lychee over and found more marks on his back and shoulders—not the punctures of bamboo canes or bruises from the fall, but instead small scratches and bite marks.

"Monkeys," she said. "They did this. They drove him over the edge."

"They must have been furious that he helped me and Rain," Ghost said. "They considered that a betrayal."

"But that means . . ." Dasher gasped.

"Rain," said Ghost. "They know Lychee is dead, so they know Rain isn't really him. She is in terrible danger."

He looked at Leaf, and Leaf nodded, and without another word they took off at a run, leaving Lychee's corpse in the hollow where he had fallen. They had to get to Rain. Leaf just hoped they weren't too late.

Chapter Thirteen

RAIN WOKE UP WITH something thin and pokey prodding her between her shoulder blades. She startled awake, raised her head and started a grumpy roar, then strangled it in her throat as she saw Brightface and Jitterpaws standing over her. In her half-awake state, she struggled to think how Lychee would respond to being prodded awake, and did her best to put a sneering smile on her face.

"What's happening?" she asked. "Do you need my help?"

"Yep," said Jitterpaws. "Need you to come with us."

Rain got up and stretched, yawning hugely. The sun was still in the sky; she must have dropped off after the Feast of High Sun.

"Come on, sleepyhead," said Brightface with a mocking grin. "Brawnshanks is waiting for you."

"I'm coming," said Rain, her Lychee impression settling down as she got her yawning under control. "Where is he? The same rock as always?"

"Near there," said Jitterpaws. "We'll show you."

They started off, Brightface running along the ground while Jitterpaws leaped from tree to tree over their heads. Rain tried to see where they were leading her before they got there, wondering just how far Brawnshanks had managed to go from his rock—perhaps she'd been wrong about the stones in his belly giving him trouble moving. Maybe he was just too ginkgo-brained to care if he was in pain.

The air grew hotter and thicker, and with every breath she could smell the fumes from the lava, even before she could see any of it. Then, at last, the two Strong Arms led her around a corner and she found herself looking out at a lake of black and red. The heat waves from the surface buffeted her as soon as it was within sight, even though it was still many panda-lengths away.

She barely recognized this place, but after a moment's confused blinking she realized that it was the center of the Broken Forest, the place where the great crack in the ground had always been. Some of the jagged

rocks still stuck up out of the boiling rock, but most of the landscape she'd seen before had crumbled or melted as the red tide rose.

It made sense to her that Brawnshanks would spend time here—after all, he'd lost his grip on reality. Still, she desperately did not want to go any closer to the molten rock, and deep unease pooled in her stomach as the Strong Arms led her toward the lake. They climbed a small hill, perilously close to a valley where a trickle of lava was flowing, new and red and gleaming, and burning up the plant life in its path. One of the jagged rocks loomed close by, and Rain could see a tunnel entrance that had once led into the underground caverns, high above her head, where only monkeys could have climbed to it. The ground was scorched and the plants were dead; even the ones that had not yet caught fire were withered and brown. The only remaining greenery clung to a tall bluff of land that jutted out into the river of boiling rock.

How can we ever put this right? she wondered.

Flecks of ash swirled through the air, and Rain blinked against the heat, scanning the dead ground for Brawnshanks.

He wasn't there, but Crookedclaw was. She was tracing shapes in the ash with her toes, and she looked up as Rain approached and gave her a satisfied smile. Rain's skin began to prickle. Where was Brawnshanks? Something was wrong here. The Strong Arms had fallen behind her, and when she looked over her shoulder, it wasn't just Brightface and Jitterpaws who were with her. Silvermane was there, and Toughtail, and several others.

"Hello, Rain," said Crookedclaw.

Rain's blood ran freezing cold and her skin felt like it was sizzling under her fur. She took a breath, looked back at Crookedclaw, and put on her best Lychee smirk—because what else could she do?

"Ha," she said. "That's a joke, I assume? You're not Brawnshanks, so I'm not Lychee?"

Crookedclaw returned the smirk, and hers wasn't fake.

"You should be glad you're not Lychee right now," she said. "You still have a use, so you are still alive. Lychee, traitor and incompetent that he was, outlived his usefulness to me. He lies dead not too far from here."

Rain swallowed and stayed silent. This could all still be a lie, designed to get her to admit who she was. But she didn't think so, somehow.

"My spies saw him with your brother," Crookedclaw went on. "They saw him escape, leaving Ghost with a bump on the head . . . right about

here?” She pointed to a spot on her own head, right where the lump had been on Ghost’s.

“Once we knew that Lychee could not be in the Broken Forest, it became very clear, very quickly, who you really were. All we had to do was watch and be quiet, and you would eventually give yourself away. I know why you’re here, Rain. You are scheming to get your stone back from Brawnshanks.” Crookedclaw let out a barking laugh. “It must have turned your stomach to see him swallow it!”

Rain gave up. She sat back on her haunches and rubbed her paw across her face, clearing the soot from around her eyes. It was starting to itch, anyway.

“You know he’s gone ginkgo-brained, don’t you?” she said, in her normal voice. “You know that Brawnshanks is doing all of this—filling the forest with fire and swallowing rocks—for no sane reason at all. He will never become a ‘Dragon Monkey.’ He will ruin the kingdom, and all for a fantasy of ruling it—which I don’t think he could do, even if he killed nine out of every ten creatures in it.”

She watched Crookedclaw closely as she spoke. She saw no shock on the flat blue face. Not even any pretence at disagreement. She was telling Crookedclaw nothing she didn’t already know.

“So why are you encouraging him?” Rain asked. “Why let it go this far?” She looked across the flat expanse of dead land to the burning lake that surrounded it, to the pockets of ash bursting into the air and drifting away, smoldering blackened trees and rocks wavering in the violent heat haze. “This is your home too, isn’t it?”

There was no point holding back now.

“Help me stop him,” she said. “Help me get my stone back, and I can fix the Dragon and fix all of this. We can live in peace, monkeys and pandas. Even after all that’s happened, I won’t interfere with you and your troop. Just help me fix this.”

She brought me to a spot where Brawnshanks wasn’t, Rain thought. *She brought me to this horrible place to talk to me alone, instead of just having me pushed into the lava. That must mean something. It must. . . .*

It did. But not the thing that Rain was hoping for. Crookedclaw laughed again.

“Tempting offer,” she said. “But I have a plan of my own, thank you, and it doesn’t involve simply returning to the way things were. Change can

be good, Rain. Embrace it."

Crookedclaw raised her hand, and the world seemed to slow down around Rain. She didn't even know what was happening, only that Crookedclaw was giving a signal, and she wanted to be standing anywhere at all other than where she was. She turned and tried to shoulder her way past the Strong Arms, but they clambered all over her, forcing her onto the small bluff.

The Strong Arms let her go and she scrambled up to the top of the bluff. There she slipped and fell to the ground as a burst of red droplets shot up on the other side, accompanied by cheers. Looking down, she saw that the monkeys had been busy with their leaves full of river water and burning sticks, drawing the trickle of burning rock along, making it burst and flow until it surrounded the bluff. Rain recoiled from the heat and stumbled along the edge of the land, desperately searching for a way out.

Above and to her left was a cliff of blackened rock. Burned tree trunks jutted out of it, like a row of long, thin fangs. But they were far beyond her reach.

If the rivers had been water, even if they'd been deep cracks in the earth, Rain would have tried to jump them—but she knew there was no way she could make it. Maybe, if she could find a way to leap four times her own height straight up in the air, she could clamber into the tunnel entrance in the jutting rock that loomed beneath the charred trunks. Maybe from there she could make her way along the ridge of the rock to safety.

Unfortunately, she was a panda, and there was no way. The bluff was now an island surrounded by burning rock. She was trapped.

Crookedclaw had planned this perfectly.

"Good work!" Crookedclaw told the Strong Arms as they gathered on the other side of the lava stream. "Do you know what this means? We have mastered the fire! We can send it where we choose, if we are brave enough and clever enough. Oh, and look," she added, delight crossing her face. "Look who's here, just in time to join us!"

"Oh, Dragon . . . ," Rain whispered.

Ghost and Leaf were hurtling down the slope toward the monkeys. They had seen her up on the bluff above the lava, but they didn't—they couldn't—know what trouble they were in. Rain longed to feel joy at the sight of them, but there was none in her heart right now.

“Careful!” she yelled. “Don’t come any closer!”

Even from here, across the distance that they all had to stay from the trickle of lava so as not to have their fur singed off their backs, she could see Crookedclaw’s expression. It was calm, thoughtful.

She’s wondering how to turn this to her advantage, Rain thought.

“Don’t do anything; don’t tell her anything! She’ll trap you, too—get out of here!” she shouted.

Her siblings slowed, but they didn’t stop. Rain’s heart sank. She wanted to believe that they could save her, but . . .

“Greetings, Dragon Speakers,” Crookedclaw announced, spreading her hands in welcome.

“What have you done?” Ghost snarled. “Let her go!”

“Why should I?” asked Crookedclaw.

“Because I’ll throw you in the burning river if you don’t,” roared Ghost.

“You probably can do that,” said Crookedclaw. “But then your sister will die. My monkeys are standing by with more water. If we throw it on this lava, it will overwhelm the island. For now, Rain is relatively comfortable where she is. If we shrink her island, she will die a slow and painful death. The only way to save her is to do exactly as I say.”

Ghost and Leaf looked up at Rain. She shook her head.

Don’t do anything she says, she thought. But she decided to save her breath. The more she tried to yell over the burning rivulet, the more she began to feel dizzy, and the breath rasped in her throat.

She could see that Ghost’s chest was heaving, and Leaf looked like she was about to lose her balance—neither of them had spent much time around the lava before, but it wasn’t just that. Leaf stared up at her, trembling with emotion.

“Let her go,” she said. “Please. Killing her won’t help you—you have to let her go.”

“Oh, I won’t be letting her go,” said Crookedclaw. “But I promise I won’t kill her—if you give me your stones.”

“No!” Rain screamed, forgetting the toxic air. Her throat burned, but she couldn’t let them do this. “No, don’t give them to her! It’s all over if you do!”

“Toughtail,” said Crookedclaw. “Why don’t you show them what happens when something alive lands in that river?”

For an awful second Rain thought she was ordering Toughtail to his death, but instead the Strong Arm picked up a large fruit and tossed it as hard as he could. It bounced and rolled into the lava stream. The monkeys all took several steps back as its skin blackened and peeled and its insides boiled out in a fizzing mist. Rain cringed and put her paws over her face, so she didn't see the explosion of lava, but she heard her siblings gasp.

"You do have your stones, don't you?" said Crookedclaw. "Leave them where you are and move, over there." Leaf and Ghost didn't move. They looked at each other and looked at Rain.

"Don't!" Rain shouted once more.

Toughtail tossed another fruit from hand to hand.

"All right," said Ghost. "Just don't hurt her."

"We'll figure it out," Leaf called up to Rain. "We can get the stones back, but we can't lose you. . . ."

Rain just shook her head and lay down on her belly to watch as the two pandas dropped their stones, glinting green and white, into the ashy grass at their paws.

"There," said Crookedclaw, pointing. "Move."

Grumbling and growling at the monkeys, Ghost and Leaf were herded away from their stones and around a rock, out of Rain's sight. Crookedclaw hurried over and picked up the two stones, one in each hand, and held them in front of her.

"They're not yours," Rain shouted. "They won't work for you. The Dragon wants to be whole again!"

Crookedclaw tilted her head. "Can you hear something?" she asked Silvermane.

"No, Crookedclaw," said Silvermane.

"Rain!" called Ghost's voice.

Rain looked up, her heart swelling with hope—had he found a way after all? Were they all going to get out of here and take back their stones? But no—his voice was coming from high over her head, from the top of the jutting rock among the blackened trunks. Sure enough, there was a way up there from dry land—but there was no rescue coming. Ghost and Leaf were being pushed to the edge of the rock by a whole gang of Strong Arms.

Rain pounded down the hill and across the shriveling grass to stand beneath the rock.

“Get down there with her, or we flood the island and Rain dies,” snarled Jitterpaws.

Ghost and Leaf looked terrified, their fur blowing in the heat haze. The monkeys prodded them toward the edge, and Rain’s blood ran cold.

“You’ll have to jump,” she called up.

“What?” Ghost’s paw slipped on the edge of the rock, and Leaf let out a horrified yelp.

“Jump!” said Rain. “If you fall straight down, you could hit the lava! Either turn and fight, or jump!”

“You heard the panda,” said Jitterpaws, and gave Leaf a hard shove in the flank. Leaf stumbled, gasped, and then jumped.

She plummeted to the island, hit the grass, and rolled to a stop in a shivering heap. Ghost roared at the monkeys, then followed her, leaping and landing in a slightly more controlled way, though he still rolled over and over and came up limping on one paw.

“Leaf!” Rain gasped, and ran over to her sister. She nuzzled her face, and to her relief Leaf looked up. She was alive. “Are you okay? I’m so sorry—you should have run for it. . . .”

“Bruised. Everywhere.” Leaf carefully pressed herself to her paws. “Hurts, but I’m okay. I’m sorry too, Rain. But I wouldn’t let her hurt you!”

Rain shook her head.

“Maybe now that she has the stones, she’ll lose interest in us,” she said. But that was a thin silver lining in a very deep, dark cloud, and she thought the others knew it too.

The monkeys hooted and howled with triumph, and then they were gone. Crookedclaw was probably taking the stones to Brawnshanks right now—why, Rain still couldn’t figure out.

Ghost flopped down beside Leaf and Rain and let out a deep sigh. The triplets looked at each other, and Rain relaxed a little. Her brother and her sister were here. In almost the worst possible circumstances . . . but they were here, together, for the first time in what felt like a very long while.

“I missed you,” she said.

“I missed you, too,” said Leaf. She flopped down on her side with her chin resting on Rain’s paw.

“I wish we’d eaten something before we came here,” said Ghost.

Rain laughed, and for a moment it felt almost as if they were lounging on a lush hillside in the Southern Forest, not a dying patch of earth

surrounded by burning rock.

“I don’t suppose you two have a cunning plan about getting us out of here?” she said.

“Not exactly,” Leaf admitted. “But we do have a secret weapon. It’s all up to Dasher now. . . .”

Chapter Fourteen

WINTER WAS DEAD, SO this must be a vision. A message from the Snow Cat or the Great Dragon. It probably meant that Shiver should be paying close attention to everything she was seeing.

But she couldn't seem to focus on much except the fact that her mother was standing in front of her. She seemed so real. Why shouldn't she be real? Strange things were happening all over the place these days. Couldn't the Dragon have brought her back?

"Mother," she whispered, and took a step forward. "Is it you? Are you really here?"

Winter blinked happily and walked forward to meet her. Her fur glittered like the snow under moonlight, and her paw prints looked just like the ones Shiver had followed into the forest.

"I miss you," Shiver said. "Please, won't you talk to me?"

"Darling Shiver," said her mother, and Shiver gasped, the freezing air of the snowy forest stinging the back of her throat. "I miss you, too."

She reached out her nose and touched it to Shiver's. Her mother's flesh was insubstantial. There was nothing there. But still, warmth filled Shiver's heart.

"I wish I could stay," Winter said. "But I must show you something."

She stepped aside and stood shoulder to shoulder with Shiver. Her mother was still bigger than her, but not quite as much as she remembered.

Winter began to dig through the snow, and despite her insubstantial body, her paws seemed to move the snow as if she were really there. Underneath, a gleaming sheet of ice was revealed, reflecting their faces . . . until suddenly red light burst across its surface. Shiver jumped, then peered into the ice with dismay as she realized she was looking at a river of fire just like the ones she'd seen in the Northern Forest. It flowed sluggishly around an island of dead grass, and in the center of the island, huddled together, were three round figures. Two black-and-white and one pure white.

“Ghost!” Shiver gasped. “And his sisters! Is this . . . is this really happening? Is it happening *now*?”

Winter nodded sadly. “Please,” she said. “I tried to save Ghost once, and now I have no power to do it again, but you . . . you have everything you need.”

“How can I help them?” Shiver searched her mother’s face for answers. Winter blinked again, and she rubbed her ghostly muzzle against Shiver’s.

“You will,” she said. “And you will not be alone. I will be with you, and your littermates, always. I believe in you, all of you.”

“Don’t go,” Shiver blurted out. “Please . . .”

“I cannot stay,” said Winter. “Find him. Help him. Or all will be lost. . . .”

The glittering surface of her fur suddenly seemed to dull. The swirling mist of snow in the air turned gray, and Shiver sniffed, her nose assailed by the scent of smoke. As Winter melted from sight, her eyes loving to the last, Shiver realized that it wasn’t snow in the air around her at all. It was ash.

The ice sheet that had shown her the triplets was just a puddle of water.

Shiver turned and ran, as fast as her lungs would allow, back to her littermates. As she crossed the snowfield, she noticed that the Dragon’s Claw was already looking better, and that there was a single set of paw prints leading toward the forest—and they were her own.

Snowstorm and Frost were wide-eyed with shock when she told them about her encounter with Winter.

“But why—” said Frost, and then he shut his mouth and looked away.

Why me? Shiver thought. *That’s what you’re wondering. Why only come to me?*

She didn’t have an answer for him.

There was pain, worry, and pride all mingled in Snowstorm’s face as she looked into Shiver’s eyes and said seriously, “You have to go. Ghost needs you. We’ll stay and make sure this gets done right. And we’ll remember your trick if they start arguing again,” she added with a wink.

“Yes, you should go,” said Frost, seemingly pulling himself together. “Find help for the triplets. We’ve got this.”

Shiver head-butted both of them gratefully, then scrambled away. There was no time to lose. It was a long journey, and Ghost’s life relied on her making it in time. . . .

Night fell, and Shiver ran on, over snowfields and rocky ridges and through thick pine forests. She ran as the moon rose, and as it began to fall again. She ran until the stars overhead blazed with light, and then until they had faded behind banks of smoky cloud. The air grew warmer, the plant life thicker and greener. She ran until her paws were numb and she was so tired that she began to stumble.

At last, when she lost control on a steep slope and found herself sprawled in a heap at the bottom of a valley, she crawled into the hollow of some tree roots and curled up tight, closing her eyes and falling asleep in the very same moment.

When she woke, she knew the sun must have risen, but it was muffled and dim behind thick gray cloud. She got up, shook herself, and started off again.

She was hungry, but there was no time to look for prey, so when she sensed movement in the undergrowth around her, she didn't slow down but made sure that she knew where the moving creature was. If she could pounce and kill it quickly, she would keep her strength up for the rescue—however she was going to manage it. But if it got away, she would waste precious energy trying to chase it down.

The creature, whatever it was, kept pace with her. Was it trying to outrun her? Or . . . was it following her?

When she heard another rustling sound on the other side of her and caught the movement of leaves in the branches over her head, she realized that it was the latter. She had been distracted by her hunger, and now she was surrounded.

She skidded to a halt just in time for the first golden monkey that dropped from the trees to sail past her face rather than land on her back. But the first one wasn't alone. More of them swarmed out of the undergrowth and dropped from branches, mobbing her, grabbing great fistfuls of her fur. She tried to snap at them, managed to get a monkey arm between her teeth and bite down hard. Blood spurted across her tongue and the monkey screamed, but holding it in her jaws meant she couldn't see her own paws, and the other monkeys grabbed at her legs and pulled her down. She dropped the monkey as she fell and it skittered away, holding its limp arm and wailing.

"Bite us, would you?" snarled one of the other monkeys, and she felt a pair of small, sharp teeth clamp down on her ear. Then another, and then

claws ripped at her fur. She tried to get up and shake the monkeys off, but there were so many of them, and she was all alone, lost in the Northern Forest. . . .

"She's a Speaker ally," sneered one of the monkeys. "Crookedclaw said to get rid of her. Go for the throat!"

Shiver twisted and yowled as the monkeys tried to force her head up and bite at her neck. She managed to toss another one aside with a jerk of her head, but she felt the sharp teeth close in her neck and saw nothing but golden fur and leering blue faces. . . .

Then there was a deep and ferocious roar from somewhere to her right, and the monkeys paused. Some of them looked up, away from Shiver, and shrieked in fright. Some clung on as if their life depended on it, but most of them yelped and scattered as something huge and powerful landed right beside Shiver and roared again. Large paws, claws extended, raked the ground. Shiver saw a glimpse of black-and-orange fur, and then the last of the monkeys was torn from her and its scream was cut off with a crunching sound.

Shiver stumbled to her feet, shaking her head, and saw a tiger standing beside her, a dead monkey dangling from its jaws.

"Crookedclaw's orders!" yelled one of the monkeys, from the safety of a tree branch. "Get them!"

The other monkeys hesitated. The tiger dropped the dead monkey at its paws and roared again, blood and flecks of saliva spattering the monkeys.

They turned and ran.

"Are you hurt?" asked the tiger, her voice resonating deep in her chest. Shiver couldn't answer for a moment. She had never met Shadowhunter, the tiger protector of the Dragon Speakers, before he'd given his life to end Dusk Deepwood's reign. But Ghost had told her all about him, and he'd mentioned Nightwalker, the daughter of Shadowhunter's sister, who had come to take over his duties. Ghost had called her a cub! He hadn't mentioned that she was huge, or that she was so majestic. Shiver found herself awestruck for a moment by the power in the tiger's stance as she looked at Shiver and then up to check that the monkeys were really gone.

"Not hurt badly," Shiver said. "Thanks to you. You . . . must be Nightwalker?"

Unless there are two enormous, beautiful tigers wandering the kingdom, she thought.

“I am,” said Nightwalker. “I had a vision—more of a feeling—that I was needed in the north, so I came. I am glad I found you in time.”

“You—you came here for me?” Shiver stuttered.

“You are important,” said Nightwalker. “I don’t get visions about things that aren’t important.”

Shiver didn’t know what to say to that. “Do you know about the triplets?” she asked as soon as she could catch her breath. “They’re in danger! The monkeys trapped them on an island surrounded by the burning rivers! I had a vision too,” she added, allowing herself a little burst of pride.

Nightwalker pinned back her ears and growled. Shiver had to dig her claws into the ground to stop herself from cringing, even though she knew the tiger was not angry with her.

“Then we must go,” she said. “There’s no time to lose. Can you run?”

“I’m not hurt, but . . .” Shiver paused, embarrassment creeping over her. She’d been the runt of her litter and still wasn’t as strong as other snow leopards, let alone a tiger. “I can’t go as fast as you. Maybe you should go without me.”

“No. It’s clear I was sent to help you get to them, and that is what I will do. We go the fastest *you* can go,” said Nightwalker, and she turned in one smooth movement, her long muscular tail lashing. “Run, friend, and I will follow!”

Shiver took a deep breath and bounded away. Nightwalker kept pace beside her, and together they made their way deeper into the forest, over streams and ridges and under the canopies of golden ginkgo trees until they were running through the ash and smoke of the Broken Forest.

Shiver didn’t know what they would do when they found the triplets. But with Nightwalker at her side, she almost felt she was capable of anything.

I just hope we’re not too late. . . .

Chapter Fifteen

IT WAS A RESTLESS night for the triplets. The crackling surface of the lava lake cast a constant flickering red light into the sky around them, and the heat was almost unbearable. Leaf lay on her back, staring up at the sky, hoping for a glimpse of the stars, but they were nowhere to be found. Rain and Ghost lay close by, Ghost curled up like one of his littermates, Rain sprawled on her front, shifting position restlessly.

They talked all night, from Sun Fall to Moon Fall. They told each other stories of what they had been through. Rain and Ghost listened to her talk about her dreams, about the deep dark place she had found herself in, and how Nightwalker had come to care for her. Leaf gasped as Rain told them about confronting Lychee over Pebble's murder, and Ghost talked about Nightwalker as well, and about the cave collapse that had finally killed Brisk and Sleet.

They talked about what they would do next. They discussed ways they could reach the rock ledge they had been forced to jump from: not many, and all of them involved outside help of a kind that Dasher was too small to provide alone. They talked about all sorts of things that would not work, many of them impossible to even try. But Leaf felt better for it anyway, as the red light started to be tempered with the gray of dawn in the Broken Forest.

She felt a nervous, sleepless energy as she faced the new day, which was preferable to feeling only the hunger gnawing at her belly. They had scoured the spit of land, but not a leaf of bamboo, or of any other plant they could eat, was to be seen anywhere.

"Look," cried a voice as Golden Light was turning to Sun Climb. Leaf turned her head to see where it had come from, and saw that there were monkeys up on the black cliff again. "There they are," jeered one, pointing and nudging its companion. "The three Dragon idiots!"

The other monkeys roared with laughter, as if it had been funny.

"They're climbing those trees over there, too," said Ghost under his breath, nodding to a distant canopy, where the branches were full of little

golden-haired bodies straining to see across the distance between the unburnt trees and the island where the triplets lay.

“Oh, Dragon,” said Rain, her voice full of resigned disgust. “They’re everywhere. Something must be about to happen.”

It seemed as if every monkey in the forest had made its way toward the island in its lava lake, to jeer at the siblings or at least to watch in fascination. The jeers were the loudest, but when Leaf took a short stroll around the confines of their prison, peering out at the monkeys, she saw that some of them looked a little less delighted. Some refused to meet her gaze. Some even looked as if they might be about to say something sympathetic before they remembered they were surrounded by their troop and didn’t speak up after all.

Have they finally realized that Brawnshanks has gone too far? she wondered. *We didn’t think to work that into our escape plans. . . .*

At last, Brawnshanks himself made an appearance. He came to the top of the jutting cliff so he could look down at the triplets, shoving the other monkeys aside. He was flanked by Crookedclaw and the Strong Arms.

“The pandas are finished,” he announced, waving his arms with great expansive motions. “Look at their leaders now! The Dragon is dead and gone, its Speakers captured! And the Dragon Monkey lives, and rules, as the Dragon was always afraid to do!”

Most of the monkeys whooped, but Leaf could tell that some of them were a little bit hesitant.

“But it is *not enough*,” declared Brawnshanks, and this time Leaf definitely heard at least one monkey let out a tired groan. “I split the Dragon—I took its throat in my hand and plunged it into the lake of fire!”

Leaf was fairly sure that wasn’t what had happened. None of them had been there to see it, but she looked at Rain, who she knew had spoken to monkeys who were. Rain rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“Not even close,” she muttered.

“And out came three more Dragons,” cried Brawnshanks, unstoppable now that he was in full flow. “They hid in the stones, ready to bend to my will, but the Dragon Monkey will not hide! When *he* splits in three, the stones will come to him!”

Now Leaf heard, louder than the groans, confused muttering among the monkeys, and she understood their puzzlement. Brawnshanks’s speech was getting harder to follow.

“What the Bamboo Kingdom needs is *more* Dragon Monkeys!” he declared. “The Dragons are here, in the air, all around us! And a plunge into the fire, yes, that will do it!” He held his hands up to the sky and took a step forward, his toes curling over the edge of the rock.

“No!” Leaf gasped. She stared at Brawnshanks, at his blue face twisted in triumph, his staring eyes, his bulbous stomach. She hated him—at least, she remembered that she *had* hated him the last time they’d spoken. He’d been a scheming rotten seed at the heart of the forest. It was his fault that Dusk had risen to power, his fault in a roundabout way that Aunt Plum and Shadowhunter had died. . . .

But this wasn’t the Brawnshanks she had last met. He’d been powerful, and maybe evil, but measured and clever. This creature was simply unhinged.

“He can’t be serious,” she whispered to Rain, anguish in her voice.

“I don’t know anymore,” Rain replied. She was watching Brawnshanks with an expression of horror, but fascination, too.

“Crookedclaw!” Leaf yelled. “By the Nine Feasts, you have to stop him! Crookedclaw!”

Crookedclaw gave Leaf a cool glare and said nothing.

Brawnshanks threw his head back.

“Two Speaker stones reside within me,” he said. “I will use their power to make me not one creature, but many! I will be the kingdom itself!”

Two stones, Leaf thought desperately. *So Crookedclaw hasn’t told him that we gave ours up . . . he hasn’t swallowed them . . . and that means that whatever her plans are, maybe she doesn’t need Brawnshanks anymore. . . .*

“Brawnshanks,” she yelled, her voice rasping through the horrible fumes. “Crookedclaw has betrayed you! Don’t do this!”

But Brawnshanks didn’t seem to even hear her now. He was swaying on the edge of the cliff, the lava below lighting his face, the heat waves making his fur stand on end, so that he almost seemed to be really glowing.

“The Dragon Monkey will rise,” he said. “Stronger, better, *more*, so many more. I will be unstoppable!”

And with that, as the monkeys and the pandas looked on in appalled silence, he toppled over the edge and fell into the lava.

All around them, monkeys screamed.

The burning river took him just the same way it had taken everything else that had crossed its path: messily, spitting out clumps of burning hair

and bursting up onto the land in great sizzling gouts of red rock. The triplets hurriedly backed away.

There was an expectant silence. Some of the monkeys were craning to stare into the lava, as if to see what would happen next.

But nothing did. Brawnshanks was gone. He was dead, and for no reason. A slow chorus of low monkey voices began, some of them speaking in dismay, others in simple confusion.

Leaf stared at the spot where Brawnshanks had gone down until looking at the burning river made her eyes hurt. The lava was rising—she could both see it for herself and hear Rain and Ghost muttering urgently about it, but she felt too shocked to move.

Then something did happen. The lava bubbled again, and a small object rose to the top and was expelled from it with great force, flying through the air, tumbling and spinning.

It was a stone. Rain's Speaker stone, glinting blue as it struck the rock and rolled off onto land, just beside the lava flow.

On the wrong side.

Rain made a strangled noise and tried to move toward it, but Ghost put his body between her and the burning rock.

"What are you going to do?" he challenged her. "Dive in and swim across? Do you want to go the same way as Brawnshanks?"

"If it had *just* come down on this side . . . ," Rain said, through gritted teeth.

"But it didn't," said a voice. It was Crookedclaw. She was fighting the heat as she climbed down from the cliff and toward the bank where the stone was lying, holding her arm up to shield her eyes. "The Dragon has truly forsaken you, hasn't it?"

Leaf hurried up and took a position on the other side of Rain. She saw her sister's disgust as Crookedclaw used a long stick to fish the stone toward her, then scooped it up in one hand.

The rising lava was creeping, ever so slowly, up onto the land around them. Where it passed over the dead grass, it burned up in a flash, and soon the triplets were surrounded by a sizzling ring of flame and smoke.

Chapter Sixteen

THE LOOKS IN LEAF'S and Ghost's eyes made Rain's heart ache, even as her blood was boiling. Ghost was blankly afraid, staring after Crookedclaw, out of ideas and already blaming himself for everything. And Leaf just looked distressed, as if it were an old friend she'd watched hurl himself into the lava, not a long-hated enemy. The question *What do we do now?* hung between them.

"We just have to see what Crookedclaw's next move is," Ghost muttered.

"There's still Dasher," said Leaf, but her voice wavered.

Rain didn't say it, but she had to wonder what use a little red panda would be now. He would have to go get help—so much help—and even if he did make it in time, what could anyone do?

She had to know what Crookedclaw was up to, so she brushed past her siblings and climbed the little hill at one side of their shrinking island so she could see out over more of the monkeys. Sure enough, Crookedclaw had picked herself a spot on top of a rock where she could address the others. She was holding up Rain's stone—Rain growled, but noted she couldn't see where the monkey had hidden the other two.

"Listen to me, all of you!" she announced.

It took her more than one attempt to get all the monkeys to quiet down and pay attention. Lots of them had questions, which they shouted out and she ignored. Many of them were a variation on *What do we do now?* Eventually Rain saw Strong Arms moving among the gathering crowd of monkeys, shoving and kicking the ones who couldn't keep quiet. At last there was enough of a hush that Crookedclaw could speak.

"My friends, my troop," she said. "A sad day has come. The end of our time here in the Broken Forest. We will never forget Brawnshanks's leadership, or his sacrifice."

She affected a brokenhearted face, and Rain felt sick. Had it been Crookedclaw who'd given him the idea to try to "split" himself in the first place? Or had she simply stood by while he concocted his own doom?

“But the time has come to move on,” Crookedclaw said. “From his obsession with the Dragons, and from the Broken Forest. There is a land beyond the Bamboo Kingdom, on the other side of the White Spine Mountains. It will be a long journey, but on the other side we will have lush forest, and no pandas to claim their false superiority over us.”

Rain frowned. “That . . . doesn’t sound so bad, actually,” she whispered to her siblings.

“Well, it’s not good,” breathed Ghost.

“Why not?”

“The land over the mountains, with the jungles, that’s where Nightwalker and her kind come from! They’re planning to take over the land of the tigers!”

Rain considered this. “Well, that sounds like a problem that solves itself, doesn’t it?” she said. “The tigers won’t just let a bunch of scorched monkeys wander in and steal their land. Right?”

Some of the monkeys had heard of the tiger jungle, and they had the same question. But Crookedclaw only smiled and held up Rain’s stone.

“Brawnshanks did his best, but he didn’t know how to use the Dragon he had—I do. I will use its power to force the tigers to obey my will! They will serve us, and we will rule in a lush new land!”

A ripple of cheers ran through the crowd of monkeys, some of them full-throated, others nervous and weak. Dismay filled Rain’s heart.

“She can’t do that,” she muttered. “Can she?”

“I don’t know,” whispered Leaf.

“I wouldn’t put it past her,” said Ghost darkly.

Rain thought of Nightwalker, her friends and family, turned into slaves for the golden monkeys, robbed of their own free will, and she shuddered. And then she thought of Crookedclaw with an army of tigers at her command, and she felt sick.

“Unfortunately . . . ,” said Crookedclaw, and the monkeys hushed again. She held the stone to her chest and looked sad, as if she were sharing bad but unavoidable news. “I am only taking the best of the troop with me.”

The split in the troop was more obvious now—some of them looked at each other in confusion and nervousness, and others just looked forward, confident in their place in the new world order: the Strong Arms, and those who Rain suspected were Crookedclaw’s own secret spies. She must have told them in advance what she was planning so that there would be no

discussion at this crucial moment. Sure enough, Crookedclaw gestured, calling out, “Troop, to me!” And her chosen monkeys moved to her side, shoving the other monkeys out of their way, forming an impenetrable barrier around Crookedclaw. Even if the others had tried to protest, all the strongest and sneakiest warriors were on her side.

Rain hated Crookedclaw in that moment, but mostly she hated how easy it would have been to admire her, if her sharp mind had been turned to good. As it was, Rain found her heart softening toward the golden monkeys, all the ones who had been manipulated, ordered around, injured, and in some cases killed for Brawnshanks’s scheme—and who were now being abandoned by the leader they had thought would save them. If they weren’t included in Crookedclaw’s troop . . . who were they?

She was torn from her contemplation as a burst of ash suddenly sprayed up in her face, and Leaf shouldered her away so that it wouldn’t sear the end of her nose.

“The river is rising,” Leaf said. Rain couldn’t resist looking down, even though it stung her eyes—the burning rock had swelled from a lethal trickle of black to a red, angry stream, swallowing the few plants that still grew on the hillside in bursts of flame and puffs of smoke and ash. Rain pulled back and looked behind them at the flat expanse where they’d spent the night, and was horrified to see that it was shrinking rapidly—with few rocks and no trees in the way, the lava was advancing unstoppably over the dead grass.

Rain’s heart thumped in her chest. She saw Crookedclaw preparing to leave, ignoring the confused and angry calls of the monkeys who were being left behind. Rain couldn’t let them go—she felt a prickling sense that she had to keep them here, to buy time, even though she didn’t know what she could be buying time for. In her blood she felt the driving urge to *do something*. Since she could do nothing else, she took a deep breath and shouted across the divide to Crookedclaw.

“Have you ever met a tiger, Crookedclaw?” she yelled. “You had better be very sure that you can use that stone, because if not, they’re not going to be ruled by some blue-faced interlopers! The Dragon won’t help you, you know! Maybe you can use it, maybe not, but the Dragon will be fighting you every step, and the moment you slip up, the tigers will devour you all!”

A few of the Strong Arms looked uncertain as she went on, but Crookedclaw chuckled to herself and waved a dismissive hand.

“Is that right? And where is your precious Dragon now?” she asked. It had worked, sort of—she was distracted, and had stopped trying to lead her followers away.

“It’s still here with us,” Leaf joined in. A light of inspiration came into her eyes, and she raised her voice again. “It’s with us, and with all the monkeys who were tricked into working against it all this time! The Dragon will grant peace and forgiveness to any monkey who helps us now!”

Yes, Leaf! It’s worth a try, Rain thought. She watched the monkeys carefully, hoping that at least a few of them would turn on Crookedclaw, but though they looked around and muttered to each other, none of them actually moved to do anything about it. . . .

“Bribery and falsehood,” spat Crookedclaw. “These pandas think they are so much better than us. They will restore the Dragon and then make slaves of all of you.”

“None of them follow you because they like or respect you, do they?” Ghost put in. “Not even your precious spies. They’re all afraid of you, and now that they know you will abandon them if it suits you, what do you think they’ll do? There are more of them than there are of you!”

Crookedclaw murmured something, and the Strong Arms gathered around her again.

They were preparing to leave. Crookedclaw turned her back on the Speakers.

Then Leaf gave a shaky gasp.

“My dream . . . ,” she said. “The creatures from my dream!”

Sure enough, out of the trees came a host of strange-looking monkeys that Rain had never seen before. They were black, with long arms and legs, no tails at all, and white fur framing their faces.

“It’s Dasher!” cried Ghost.

“Where? Where?” Leaf reared up on her hind legs and followed Ghost’s pointing paw to where a flash of red and white was running along a tree branch. Rain couldn’t hear what he was saying, but she thought she saw him point and gesture to the strange monkeys.

“Gibbons!” shouted Crookedclaw. “Strong Arms, form up!”

The Strong Arms stopped guarding Crookedclaw from their own troop and swung around to stand between her and the strange black creatures—gibbons, Rain supposed.

“He’s done it,” Leaf said, her voice thick with emotion. “He’s brought help! Dasher, over here!”

Dasher’s tail lashed as if he’d heard her, but his reply was lost in the great hooting and howling that rose from the gibbons. Rain startled as she heard it fill the air—it was more like the song of a great flock of birds, or the chanting of the pangolins, than it was like the battle cry of the monkeys. The gibbons rocked and sang, crying *“Awa oha, awa oha,”* while the golden monkeys just filled their lungs and screamed in their enemies’ faces.

The two groups faced each other, spreading out then crowding together again, repeatedly; dancing back and forth without ever making contact. They did so for what felt like an age, while the lava rose around the triplets. Rain bit down the urge to yell at them to get on with it—who knew what strange strategy the gibbons were planning? On the monkey side, Crookedclaw was in command, ordering the Strong Arms to watch and defend against the groups of gibbons. She cast a look behind her, and Rain was delighted to see she was not happy to be facing an enemy with nothing but lava and Dragon Speakers at her back. Some of the monkeys she wasn’t even expecting to had joined her side—perhaps out of some belief she’d bring them with her if they defended her now, or maybe out of loyalty to their own kind, or maybe just out of pure ingrained habit. The rest had scattered, right and left, too smart or too scared to be caught between the burning river and the leader who’d abandoned them. Or both.

The first blow was struck by a gibbon, seemingly out of nowhere—a Strong Arm strayed too close, and with a howl the gibbon leaped, paw outstretched, and clawed the monkey’s face. And with that the battle began, and chaos immediately reigned in the Broken Forest. Black and golden fur flew; monkeys screamed and hollered. Rain lost track of Crookedclaw for a moment, then found her again—she seemed to move through the fight in a bubble of safety, always commanding, never raising a hand herself, until finally a gibbon pushed through the Strong Arms and grabbed her by the tail, before being mobbed by monkeys and vanishing under a tide of golden fur. After a moment the monkeys scattered, and the gibbon lay unmoving where it had fallen.

Rain realized that Leaf was trembling, and she pressed her shoulder to her sister’s side.

“Don’t worry,” she said, “Look, Dasher’s doing well—he’s not going to let some golden monkeys hurt him.”

“It’s not that,” Leaf whispered. “It’s just . . . what’s the use? All this violence, and even if the gibbons win, it doesn’t get us out of here, not before the lava gets so close it boils us alive.”

Rain winced.

“Well,” she said.

“The gibbons take the stones from Crookedclaw,” said Ghost calmly. Rain’s heart squeezed as she realized that he had even less hope than Leaf did. “They destroy the rot at the heart of the golden-monkey troop, and Dasher takes the stones back to the pandas so when new Speakers are called, they’ll have their stones already.” He smiled at Leaf. “Do you think it’ll be Cane? Or Frog and Fir? I’m not sure any of them are Speaker material. . . .”

“Neither were we,” said Rain. She pressed her head against her brother’s shoulder and shut her eyes. Perhaps they were right, and there was no hope.

At least they were together.

Chapter Seventeen

SHIVER WAS CONFUSED. SHE thought they had reached the edge of the Broken Forest a long time ago. After all, she could see the withering of the plants around her, the trees leaning dangerously as their roots lost their grip in the dry soil, and the patches of burned ground all around. But she and Nightwalker had been running for a while since then and hadn't yet encountered even one of the burning streams. They passed by more than one creature who was sprinting in the opposite direction, head down, not even stopping to be afraid of the large tiger—a family of manul cats, several snakes, a whole clan of pikas. Shiver realized that she hadn't seen or heard a single bird since she'd left the snow line behind. She tried to tell the creatures she passed to go to the Dragon's Claw, but it cost her too much breath.

"It's spreading," said Nightwalker, and Shiver realized she was right. In a way, they *were* in the Broken Forest already—the brokenness had simply taken over large chunks of the Northern Forest, like rot spreading across a discarded, half-eaten corpse.

"The triplets are our only chance of putting this right," Shiver gasped. "We have to get to them, bring the Dragon back together. . . ."

Finally the air became hotter, even harder for Shiver to breathe, and they had to slow their pace even further. Nightwalker spotted the molten rock first, and put a large paw on Shiver's back to stop her going too close. Shiver didn't really need the reminder—it was bad enough just being this near it—but she appreciated the gesture.

"We have to go around," said Nightwalker. "There must be an end to it. This way." She sprang forward, putting her body between Shiver and the river so that Shiver was in something like shade as they pressed on, searching for a way around the terrible burning rock. They found the end of it at last, and climbed a tall hill to safely skirt around it.

As they crested the hill, and Shiver paused to catch her breath, they could see a great red glow from the center of the Broken Forest. The lava

was rising. Shiver's heart sank. How could there be any containing it now? Were they already too late to save the Speakers?

Suddenly a cacophony of howls and screeches split the air, faint with distance but unmistakable—the sound of creatures fighting one another. And among the screaming, very softly, Shiver heard something that gave her real hope for the first time since Winter had shown her the vision of the panda triplets surrounded by fire.

"Awa! Oha!"

"The gibbons are here," she gasped. The song was similar to the one she had heard in the valley—but faster, louder, angrier. "They must be fighting the monkeys!"

"Then let's join them," roared Nightwalker, with a gleam in her eyes. They sprang from the crest of the hill together and thundered down the slope toward the sounds. Nightwalker led them around more of the dreadful burning streams, over rocks and fallen trees, through drifts of ash that scattered around them and trailed in their wake, always careful not to outpace Shiver, but encouraging her with kind looks and a growl in her chest that reminded Shiver that above all, both of them were hunters, and there were creatures ahead that needed to be hunted.

They knew they were almost there when they started encountering monkeys running the other way, just like the frightened creatures of the Northern Forest—except that these yelped with terror when they saw Shiver and Nightwalker coming, and scrambled for the trees. Some of them seemed wounded; others were simply running for their lives. The sound of the battle didn't seem to be growing any quieter—Shiver wondered if these monkeys had abandoned their troop before it had even begun.

Nightwalker ignored them, so Shiver did too. Her lungs were burning from the long dash *and* from the poison in the air by the time they skidded around a large rock and found the battle arrayed before them. Golden monkeys and gibbons were clawing and biting at each other in a sea of gold and black fur. On one side the forest loomed dark and scorched, and on the other the burning river lapped at the edges of a hill that rose steeply into the shifting cloud.

Nightwalker took one look at the fighting monkeys, her lips peeled back in a toothy grin, and she let out a roar that shook the forest. The yelping of the golden monkeys and their sudden scrambles not to be in Nightwalker's way were very satisfying to watch, as Shiver hung back to try to catch her

breath. But as the tiger bowled into the fray, grabbed a monkey by the leg, and tossed it in the air, Shiver realized that the triplets weren't here. There was no sign of pandas among the fighting creatures at all.

They're still trapped! she thought, with a gasp that stung the back of her throat. *I have to find them!*

She ran to the forest line. A monkey tried to scratch at her as she passed, but one of the gibbons came sailing from the branches and landed on its back, pinning it face-first in the dry ground.

Shiver sprang up into the first tree she came to and clambered as high as she could. There were still a few gibbons up here, watching the fight, ready to intervene if they were needed. Shiver leaped from branch to branch along the tree line, dodging gibbons and slipping on soft, ashy tree bark, until she climbed high enough to look out over the burning land.

And she saw them. Behind the fighting monkeys was a strip of wasteland, then a swelling river of molten rock, then the steep hillside, and up at the top of the hill, huddled together, were the three pandas. The dry land they were standing on consisted of the hill, and little else except for a thin strip that ran out the other side. They were on an island in a sea of molten rock, and the sea was rising.

They seemed to be deep in conversation, or perhaps just protecting their faces from the heat—they didn't look up and see Shiver. She tried to call out to them, but the noise of the battle was too loud.

How? she thought. *How can we get them out of there?*

"Shiver!" a high voice cried, and Shiver looked around to see a blur of red-and-black fur leaping branches toward her.

"Dasher!" she yowled, and licked him all over his little face as soon as he came near enough. "I'm so glad you're safe—but what are we going to do?"

"Got a plan, can't do it alone, you're exactly what I needed," Dasher panted. "Come on!"

He turned and sprang back to the next branch, and the next. Shiver followed him along the tree line. They gathered gibbons as they went, Dasher calling out to them to follow and help, and the gibbons ceasing their battle song and singing back, *"Follow and see, follow and help!"*

Dasher led them down to the ground and around the edge of the battle—in fact, out of sight of the triplets altogether. Shiver's stomach twisted with

anxiety. Dasher might have a plan, but would they really have time for it? Where was he taking them?

They sprinted around a large rock and then up a short scrubby slope to a place where the burned trees somehow still stood, little more than trunks and charred branches. A few bamboo canes grew there too, and one of them, with the stubborn persistence of bamboo and without any pandas to eat it as a sprout, had grown almost as tall as a tree, at least as thick as Shiver's leg, maybe more like Nightwalker's.

Dasher ran up to it and threw his paws around it.

"Help me get it down!" he gasped. "Shiver, you're a predator—you can bite big things, right?"

"I'm no panda," she said, "but I'll try. But Dasher, how does this help the triplets?"

"There's a cliff," Dasher said. "If we push this cane over it, they can climb up. . . ."

Shiver leaned over, opened her mouth, and chomped down as hard as she could on the bamboo cane. The tough, woody coating made it feel like eating a tree, but she thought of how she'd seen Ghost crack into them, and she knew that if she could just get through the top layer and get it to splinter, eventually it would break. At least she thought so.

Dasher joined her, gnawing away at the bamboo on the other side of the cane, and the gibbons exchanged a few quick words and then piled on to try to push it over. The bamboo bent but didn't break.

Shiver didn't know how long they were wrestling with the bamboo—it felt like both a lifetime and a few moments. She got a splinter in her gum. Some of the gibbons climbed up the length of the cane and sat there, bouncing up and down, bending it lower and lower. Suddenly Nightwalker was with them, leaning her bulky shoulder against the cane with a grunt. And then, at last, with a tearing sound, the bamboo toppled and fell. With a great effort, the gibbons wrenched it from its roots, and then they proceeded to drag it up a sloping rock, following Dasher's frenzied instructions. Shiver raced to the top and looked down over the cliff edge.

Below, on their ever-shrinking island, were the triplets.

Shiver reeled, her whiskers curling from the heat. The bamboo would be long enough, she was certain. But they had to hurry. Soon lowering the cane down there would get them nothing more than a flaming cane.

"Ghost!" she yelled. "Up here!"

The triplets all looked up at once, and the looks on their faces were of shock, surprise . . . and despair.

“Push, carefully!” Dasher said, and he and the gibbons and Nightwalker all shoved the bamboo cane over the edge of the rock, edging it out farther and farther. Shiver saw the light of understanding fill the triplets’ faces, and they sprinted for the thin strip of land that was still far enough from the lava to be safe to stand on.

“Watch out,” Shiver gasped, as the cane began to tip over the edge and veer down toward the lava. She dug her teeth into one of the splintered gaps in the woody surface and pulled it toward her, and soon the gibbons had their arms around it too, and Nightwalker had closed her huge jaws around the root end to steady it as they gently lowered it to the triplets.

They were barely in time. The crown of the cane still had a few thin, wavering bunches of leaves, and they curled up and burned away in the heat without a single flame coming near them.

The end of the cane touched the ground of the island, and the triplets were already there waiting for it, shifting their paws on the burning earth.

Desperation in their faces, the pandas hesitated only long enough for Rain and Ghost to push Leaf forward to go first. She reached up, dug in her claws, pressed her belly to the thick cane, and began to clamber up. Nightwalker grunted, and Shiver, Dasher, and the gibbons all scurried to steady the bamboo, holding it tight as it bent and swayed beneath her—but then she was halfway up, and then her ears were pricking over the edge of the rock, and Shiver let go of the cane and rushed forward to grab Leaf by the scruff and drag her up and over onto safe, solid stone.

Leaf staggered to her paws, looking dazed, and stumbled down the slope of the rock, falling to a slumped sitting position with her legs splayed.

“I can’t believe it,” she gasped.

Rain was already climbing the bamboo. She came up over the lip of the rock at a headlong tumble, muttering hysterical curses under her breath, and stumbled down to sit beside her sister. Ghost came last. Shiver watched, open-eyed despite the heat, her paws trembling with fear, as he clawed and shimmied his way up, paw by paw.

If he can’t make it—Shiver thought, and then stamped down on the rest of the thought.

He will *make it. I will throw myself off this rock before I let him fall. . . .*

Bit by agonizing bit, Ghost clambered up the cane, and then at last he was within reach of the top, and Shiver's teeth were in his scruff, and she was dragging him back with all her might. Black, leathery hands reached out and took hold of her shoulders, and Ghost's paws, and the gibbons half dragged and half carried them both up over the rock, and then it was over. The cane toppled into the lava below, forgotten, as the three pandas sprawled on safe ground. Dasher ran over and pressed his head into the huddle, and for a moment the battle raging below and the stinking heat seemed to fade.

They were together, and they were safe.

The peace didn't last very long. Leaf was the first one to sit up with a gasp and cry, "The stones!"

Renewed urgency filled Shiver's paws and she jumped up. "Where are they? Do you have them? What about Rain's—where is Brawnshanks?"

"Dead," said Rain, with a look in her eyes that reminded Shiver of dark, slippery ice. "Jumped in the lava."

"He thought—" Ghost began, then shook himself. "It doesn't matter; he was wrong. The stone is with Crookedclaw. *All* of them are."

Nightwalker growled and ran past them without a word.

"Find Crookedclaw!" said one of the gibbons to the rest, and they ran off after the tiger, hooting Crookedclaw's name in a chaotic chorus. Shiver was close on their heels, and she could hear the triplets staggering to their paws behind her.

They burst back into the battle to see that it was already going badly for the golden monkeys. Many were lying injured underfoot, groaning, and trying to crawl away. A few of them had been pushed too close to the lava and were running for their lives with burning tails, or had collapsed on the ground, clutching at their throats and trying to shield their eyes. The gibbons had suffered losses too, but it was easier to spot a particular golden monkey in a sea of black fur—especially one who was trying to make for the trees.

"There she is!" Shiver yelled. "She's trying to get away!"

Nightwalker and Shiver broke into a dash at the same moment, side by side, chasing the fleeing Crookedclaw. She looked unhurt, and she was clutching all three stones to her chest as she ran. The two big cats were in step all the way to the trees, Nightwalker's longer legs matched by Shiver's burning desire to seize Crookedclaw and shake her until all the evil fell out.

Crookedclaw turned back, saw them coming, and held up the Harmony stone.

It glinted in her hand, a rainbow sheen crossing the blue surface.

“Monkeys! Fight for me!” she commanded.

Between the big cats and the tree line, a group of monkeys was fighting with the gibbons. They were Strong Arms who could hold their own, but they were still nearly overwhelmed. As one, they paused and looked up, then threw themselves at Shiver and Nightwalker, ignoring their gibbon enemies altogether. The gibbons were so surprised, they mostly failed to grab the monkeys as they pounded across the dry ground. Their eyes glinted with a strange rainbow sheen as they stared into the jaws of the leopard and the tiger.

Crookedclaw let out a cackling laugh as she saw that her command had worked, that the monkeys she was abandoning had turned to do her bidding. Then she swung away into a tree at the edge of the forest.

“No!” Shiver grunted.

She pushed herself harder than she ever had before, until she saw stars flashing in front of her eyes, and she slowly pulled ahead of Nightwalker. As the monkeys crowded in to block her, she took a great leap and soared over their heads. She landed clumsily, but by then it was too late. The monkeys and Nightwalker had met, and the tiger’s growls and the breaking of monkey bones were loud in Shiver’s ears as she scrambled after Crookedclaw. She was up in the same tree within moments. Crookedclaw gave her a brief look of genuine fear, then made to leap to the next tree. Shiver pounded along a branch, and just as Crookedclaw sprang, Shiver bunched her muscles and pushed herself off, intercepting the monkey in midair, her teeth closing on her tail.

Yes! Shiver thought, and then, *Oh, Snow Cat!* as they plummeted into the dry undergrowth together, landing in a heap. Shiver fell hard, her exhausted body already spent, and now bruised and gasping as well. All she could do was lie there with Crookedclaw’s tail in her teeth and not let go. Someone would come soon. Nightwalker, or the gibbons, or Ghost. Someone would come, she just had to hold on. . . .

She could barely take in a breath, and she could hardly see, the stars that burst in front of her eyes were so bright and painful. But suddenly they seemed to move differently, like drifting snow, and when Shiver blinked again, she saw the glittering of white fur and heard a distant growl. Then

she saw a large white paw come down on the struggling Crookedclaw, pinning her to the ground. Crookedclaw's arms went out to break her fall, and the stones rolled and bounced around them. Winter's jaws closed around Crookedclaw's throat, and the monkey went stiff.

"What *is* that?" Crookedclaw gasped.

Then Winter's glittering form dissolved, like a dream. Shiver tried to swipe out at the golden monkey, but her limbs ached so much, she could barely move them. Crookedclaw kicked out with one paw and Shiver's grip on her tail failed. She pulled it away, trailing droplets of blood.

"Shiver?" came Nightwalker's voice, and Ghost's. She could feel their pounding paw steps in the earth beneath her. "We're coming!"

"Stay right there, Crookedclaw!" yelled Rain.

Crookedclaw spat, and seized up the closest of the stones—Rain's. She reached for the next, looked back at Shiver's friends scrambling toward her, and narrowed her eyes. With a furious hiss she left the stone where it was, and turned and fled into the forest. After a moment, Shiver ducked as a whole band of Strong Arms charged into the forest after her.

Shiver tried to push herself to her paws as Rain thundered past her after the monkeys without pausing. Ghost and Leaf stopped to pick up their Speaker stones, and Ghost pressed his face to hers.

"Are you all right? That was incredible," he said. "You could make it across the Endless Maw with a jump like that!"

"Liar," Shiver groaned, but she smiled for a moment before she remembered what was going on. "She's got Rain's stone. Hurry."

"Go after her," said Nightwalker to the pandas. "Shiver and I will be right behind you. You can lean on me," she said, and nudged her muzzle beneath Shiver's shoulder.

"Go," Shiver echoed. Already the sounds of the monkeys and even Rain crashing through the forest were growing dim. Ghost and Leaf nodded and set off at a furious pace. Shiver leaned her weight against Nightwalker. "I'm not leaving them," she said.

"Never," said the tiger grimly. "I won't leave you behind either. We are going to catch her. One paw step at a time."

Chapter Eighteen

LEAF WAS EXHAUSTED, STARVING, desperate for water, but she was holding the Dark Dragon in her paw once more, and she could feel the strength she lacked being restored by the presence within the stone, just like in her dream when she'd tumbled from the tree and been caught in its coils.

I trust the Dragon, she thought. *The Dragon will guide me.*

Ghost and Leaf were catching up with Rain, whose paws were striking the ground like rocks in an avalanche as she ran after Crookedclaw and the Strong Arms who'd managed to escape with her. The monkeys were in the trees, of course, but Dasher was just behind them, and then in a moment he was up above, running through the lopsided and splintered canopy of the Broken Forest. With a hooting sound, black-furred gibbons lunged out of the trees around her and made grabs for the monkeys as they passed, but only one of them was caught—the rest evaded the grasping hands with chittering cries of nervous laughter.

The Bamboo Kingdom was full of noises, as the chase hurtled up hills and down valleys, veering left and right as they ran into lava streams or patches of empty hillside with no trees for the monkeys to hide in. Leaf's head was spinning and she didn't know where they were until she realized they had made it out of the Broken Forest—or at least the place where the Broken Forest always used to end. It was hard to tell where its stumps ended and the new swaths of burned forest began.

The monkeys stuck like burrs to the trees, and it wasn't long before their hooting laughter grew quieter, and then Rain was up ahead, her sides heaving as she caught her breath. Leaf and Ghost made their way up to her, and Leaf saw that she was glaring at the canopy as if she could cause it to burst into flame with the power of her mind.

"Where did they go?" Ghost asked, and then flinched as Rain turned her burning stare on him.

"I lost them," she growled. "They were too fast. I lost them."

She let out a furious roar and clawed the trunk of a nearby tree, ripping the bark away.

“It’s not your fault,” said Dasher, clambering down the tree. “I lost them too. I think they’re heading for the mountains again now, but they could go anywhere—we need to find another way to get to them.”

The three Dragon Speakers all stood together, breathing hard for a moment. A few gibbons returned, shaking their white-ringed heads sadly. Then Leaf raised her head and looked at Dasher.

“I know a way,” she said. “I know somewhere we can see almost the whole forest. My dream wasn’t just about the gibbons.”

She set off at a run, and behind her she heard Dasher chuckle as he explained to the others. “Grandfather Ginkgo!”

The Slenderwood felt strangely quiet. Perhaps it was just because they were back in a cooler, greener place, this place that had been her home, after the roaring heat of the lava lake.

Her siblings and Dasher, Nightwalker, and Shiver all caught up to her as she was standing at the foot of Grandfather Ginkgo, steeling herself for the long climb.

“It’s the tallest tree in the Northern Forest,” she told them. “I used to climb it all the time. You can see to the river, and beyond. I used to look over, and think about our mother and Rain—I didn’t know about you,” she added with a sheepish glance at Ghost.

“I thought I was a leopard,” said Ghost in a deadpan voice. “I forgive you.”

“You don’t have to climb it with me,” Leaf said.

“Then how will those on the ground know when you get stuck?” said Rain. “Go on. Just . . . give us a bit of help with paw holds, and we’ll be fine.”

It felt like a long time since Leaf had last climbed a tree without trying to reach something or escape something. She felt like she was back in the Prosperhill, climbing for the sheer joy of it. She dug in her claws and swung her weight from branch to branch, indicating to Rain and Ghost which would hold them up and which to avoid, shouting down when they should take breaks if they needed to. Dasher ran up the trunk beside her, little claws scrabbling on the bark. Leaf heaved herself up into the crook of two branches, and felt the tree shift slightly underneath her. She was getting near the top now, and the trunk was thinning. The canopy was still thick around her, so she pushed on until she started to see breaks between the wide golden leaves.

Even before she lifted her head out of the canopy, she knew she wasn't going to like what she saw. There were glimpses of smoke on all sides. When she finally got out into the fresh, open air, she stared down at the Northern Forest and felt her heart sink.

Whether it was because the burning lake at the center of the Broken Forest had risen, or because the lava had been slowly spreading the whole time, she wasn't sure. But from here, she could see red-hot streams spreading out from the Broken Forest like tendrils from a great vine. Some of them were almost at the river. If the hot stone met the cool water, what would happen? Was the water strong enough to overcome the fire?

She tried to focus. This was important to know, but it wasn't why she was here. She searched the trees below her for golden fur, or the telltale shake of monkeys passing through the branches.

Rain reached the branch below her, clinging hard to the trunk of the tree, with Ghost on her heels. They both looked out and saw the spreading lava tendrils.

"Great Dragon," Rain muttered under her breath.

"There, look!" Ghost gasped. "Is that them?" He tried to gesture with one paw, and then broke off with a yelp as the branch bent underneath him. He grabbed for the trunk, making the whole tree shake. Rain flattened herself to the bark.

But Leaf kept her grip firm on the swaying tree and her eyes fixed on the canopy, and she saw what Ghost had seen: trees moving, and small shapes passing through the gaps between the branches.

"Ghost! You found them!" Leaf called down.

"Good," said Ghost in a slightly strangled voice.

"Was Dasher right? Are they heading toward the mountains?" Rain asked. She shakily pulled herself up and looked through the leaves.

"Yes, they . . . no . . . wait . . ."

Hope swelled in Leaf's heart as she scanned the forest, trying to predict where the monkeys would go—and every route she tried was now blocked, either by a wall of billowing smoke or by the gleaming red light of molten rock.

Leaf began to laugh.

"What?" Rain asked, trying to reach out to see for herself.

"Crookedclaw is trapped," Leaf said. "She can't get past the lava streams. So she's going to have to turn back toward the river—the real river,

the river of water. And that means we can catch her!”

“Well, let’s go, then!” Ghost said, and started climbing down, letting himself dangle and fall from branch to branch.

Leaf took one more moment to study the landscape, to make sure she wasn’t wrong—but she wasn’t. Brawnshanks’s obsession with the lava, his feeding of it—even his death, maybe—might have cost Crookedclaw her Speaker stone after all.

But they had to get there first.

This time they sent Nightwalker ahead with the gibbons, to fan out around the part of the river Leaf thought Crookedclaw and her Strong Arms would be forced toward: just upriver of the Egg Rocks. There Nightwalker and the gibbons would lie in wait and keep an eye out, in case the monkeys were faster than they thought. Meanwhile, the triplets and Shiver headed straight for the river.

They encountered more gibbons as they went, many of them leading groups of animals. Shiver explained that they were gathering for the reuniting of the Dragon, and Leaf was glad to see that Rain and Ghost looked just as puzzled as she did.

“You mean—you know how we can do it?” she gasped.

“Long story, no time,” Shiver said. “They need to do what they’re doing.”

“All right,” said Leaf. She addressed the gibbon in front of her, and the group of assorted small creatures and one large takin who’d gathered behind him. “If you see the other gibbons, or any other creature who’s loyal to the Dragon and wishes to help the Speakers, tell them to make for the river. We may need their help.”

Leaf winced as she saw the river open up in front of her and realized that even the great expanse of water hadn’t escaped being affected by the explosions in the Northern Forest. Pockets of ash floated on the surface, churned up into foam as they passed through the rapids. Leaf and her siblings hurried along the banks. Leaf could still see the evidence of the great flood around her, the trees with algae and moss growing right up to the tops of their trunks, and the wide mudflats where silt had settled during the flood and was now firming up under her paws, mostly because of the water grasses and bamboo stands that had started to grow along its edges.

It’s been too long since I’ve seen the kingdom, she thought. *Really seen it. When this is all over . . .*

Except she couldn’t imagine it. She didn’t know what would be left of the kingdom by then. Perhaps it would be a place of deadly boiling rivers and stinking ash clouds for the rest of time. . . .

But as Leaf splashed through the shallows of the great river, she felt a certainty in her chest, a certainty as solid as the stone she held tucked into her paw: Whatever happened to the kingdom, Crookedclaw was not going to get away with the Harmony Dragon. “Rain!” called a voice, and Leaf startled as a trio of golden monkeys came leaping over one of the river crossings just ahead. But Rain ran to greet them, and so did Dasher.

“Nimbletail,” Rain said. “Quicktail, Goldback—what are you doing here?”

“Gibbons,” said Nimbletail. “They said we were gathering for some sort of a ceremony, and then we heard about Brawnshanks. . . .” She shuddered. “Anyway, I owe Crookedclaw for what she tried to do to me and my band.”

The golden monkeys fell in step with the pandas and Shiver as they hurried toward the spot where Leaf thought Crookedclaw would be forced to come to the bank. Sure enough, a line of smoke was cutting across the Northern Forest whenever the cliffs parted or the wide river valleys allowed them to see to the north. As they drew closer, Leaf realized that they had gathered a silent following of supporters—gibbons on the cliff tops, red pandas high in the trees.

At last they emerged onto one of the long mudflats, and Leaf saw Nightwalker crouching in the shadow of a large rock, surrounded by gray shapes.

“It’s the wolves!” gasped Nimbletail in dismay.

Leaf had been thinking the same, but without the dismay. She looked down at the monkeys and then over at the wolves, and something slid into place.

“They’re here as our allies,” she said to Nimbletail. “I know it’s hard—they tried to eat me too, and would have if I hadn’t been a Speaker. But we need their help now.”

Nimbletail and her band looked at each other.

“I . . . suppose,” said Quicktail, extremely doubtfully.

Right now that was good enough for Leaf.

The triplets ran across the bank to Nightwalker, who greeted them with a swish of her tail.

“Crookedclaw is coming,” she said. “The patrol is returning here along the line of the burning river; they went to make sure she was heading this way. She’ll have no option—soon, the lava will reach the water. Crookedclaw will want to get through before that happens. We will not let her.”

The wolves nodded, and though one of them tilted her head at Nimbletail, they didn’t say anything, which was also good enough for Leaf.

“Patrol?” asked Ghost. “Is that the gibbons?”

“And the pandas,” said Nightwalker.

Leaf looked up, and her heart lifted as she saw a group of familiar faces peeking out from the undergrowth onto the open bank: Juniper, Grass, Crabapple, Gale, and Hyacinth Hollowtree, with young Cane, as well as Azalea, Granite, and Yew Prosperhill.

Leaf felt as if a hole in her heart she hadn’t even known about had been suddenly filled. These were her family, and she hadn’t seen them since leaving the Southern Forest. She ran over to greet them, but there was no time.

“Crookedclaw’s coming,” said Yew. “We’re going farther down to cut her off. Good luck, Speaker!”

Leaf watched the pandas as they ran on down the bank, her heart glowing with warmth at the sight of them. These weren’t predators; they weren’t fighters. But every one of them had decided to walk into danger to save the Dragon, and the kingdom.

The triplets, Shiver, and their group of gathered allies huddled beside the large rock that Nightwalker had picked, and they waited.

Just as Leaf was starting to think that Crookedclaw might have found another way, that all of this was for nothing, a golden monkey swung out of the trees and landed on the bank, looking up and down. It was the Strong Arm Jitterpaws. She gestured, and Crookedclaw stalked out into the open, surrounded by the remaining Strong Arms.

Rain took a deep breath, and stepped out.

“Crookedclaw!” she called.

Leaf and Ghost stepped up beside her. Crookedclaw turned—she didn’t startle, but she glared at the triplets. Leaf thought she could see the calculation behind her flat, blue face as she saw the pandas, then Shiver and Nightwalker, and then Nimbletail, the gibbons, the red pandas, the wolves.

She didn’t move or speak for a long moment, and then she held out the Harmony stone.

“Are you looking for this?” she called across the mud.

“You know we are,” said Rain. “Hand it over. There’s nowhere to go. You’re trapped.”

“Hmm.” Crookedclaw held the Harmony stone close to her chest for a moment. The light caught it, and it gleamed. “Are you sure about that? Are you sure that it’s not *you* who’s trapped?”

“What are you talking about?” Leaf demanded. She looked over her shoulder and didn’t see anything that scared her—the only lava stream running down to the river was coming behind Crookedclaw, and she was surrounded by allies.

Then there was a low growl at her paws, and she looked down to see Dasher staring up at her with wild eyes, his small teeth bared.

“Dasher, what’s wrong?” she said.

“Uh. Leaf.” Rain nudged her, and Leaf looked up to see that Nightwalker had stalked in front of the triplets, and she was baring her teeth.

“Shiver, hey,” Ghost was saying. “Come on, it’s me!” Shiver was stalking in front of him, growling low in her throat.

They were surrounded all right. Wolves, red pandas, and golden monkeys were flanking them, their eyes too bright, the rainbow sheen glinting as they caught the light.

“Crookedclaw is using the stone on you,” Rain told Nightwalker. “Please. Don’t do this. Don’t listen to her!”

“You can fight this off,” Leaf cried. “You can—you just have to remember why we’re here!”

“To kill the Speakers,” sneered Goldback, and lunged for Leaf. Leaf managed to throw her off. The monkey stumbled into one of the wolves, who gently helped her back to her feet and made snapping motions at Leaf’s back legs.

“To save the kingdom!” Leaf said. She looked at her siblings. Rain was facing off with Nightwalker, holding her gaze. Ghost was turning on the spot, as if he could keep their friends at bay if he just looked at them all one by one. “To save the Dragon! If you have any love for the Great Dragon, don’t do this!”

She gripped the Dark Dragon stone in her paw, and the world seemed to slow. Nightwalker was bunching her muscles to spring. The wolves were beginning to bark, the red pandas to rise up and show their claws; even Shiver was snarling and snapping. . . .

Help us, she thought desperately. *Show our friends the lie that Crookedclaw is weaving!*

She felt something bubbling up inside her, as if she were being raised on a great wave, and then a shadow flashed in front of her vision. A shadow, cast by nothing, with scales that gleamed with the light of the stars on a clear night. It was real, and the others saw it—it wound around the three Speakers, between their friends, crossing each face and leaving behind clear eyes, dark with shock but free of the rainbow sheen of forced harmony. One by one their friends startled and looked around at Crookedclaw, and Leaf could tell from the yelps of fear and confusion that they could see the same thing she did: Crookedclaw had no face, just a flat plane of blurry blue skin.

Her face was back in moments, but Leaf thought that the vision would stay with all of them for a very long time.

Crookedclaw tried to run. She let out a hiss of frustration and yelled for the Strong Arms to get out of her way as she turned to head for the gap between the encroaching trickle of burning rock and the river.

“We can’t let her get away,” Ghost said, but Rain was already running. Leaf scrambled after her, with Ghost on her heels.

It wasn’t until they were almost at the spot where the Strong Arms had been standing that Leaf felt the blast of heat on her cheek. She looked around and saw the first dribbles of hot rock dripping from the edge of a stone shelf. She spun to face her friends, the fumes from the lava making her head feel light and fuzzy.

“Don’t come any closer!” she shouted. “It’s too late!”

Their friends looked like they were going to ignore her. She stood in place, waving her paws, until the sizzling stone was so close she could feel her side begin to burn.

“I mean it!” she said, and then broke off, gasping, as the fur on her side curled up and wilted like the leaves on the bamboo cane. . . .

Then Shiver saw what was happening, and Leaf saw the gleam of horrified realization in her eyes. She skidded in front of the others. Nightwalker ran right into her and looked down, frowning, and Shiver shook her head.

“We can’t!” she said. “It’s too dangerous!”

“Leaf, come on!” Ghost yelped, and Leaf felt him grab her by the scruff of the neck and drag her backward, away from the path of the lava. She stumbled after him. Ahead, Rain was charging over the bank, leaping rocks and sliding through mud pools, gaining on Crookedclaw at last.

It’s just us and her, Leaf thought. *And we won’t stop now. . . .*

Chapter Nineteen

RAIN PLANTED HER PAWS in the mud, feeling the water lapping around her fur. It gave her a strength she hadn't truly felt in days.

This is my place, she thought. *This is my part of my kingdom, the home of my part of the Dragon. No monkey is going to take that from me.*

"Crookedclaw!" she bellowed.

To her surprise, Crookedclaw turned to face her.

Ghost and Leaf were flanking Rain now—Ghost was growling and clawing the mud at his paws like a snow leopard, and Leaf was breathing hard, her fur smelling of something singed. But when Rain advanced on Crookedclaw, her brother and sister were with her, step by step.

Rain couldn't see the Strong Arms. She'd seen them pass the lava, but by the time she'd caught up, they were out of sight. She didn't like that at all. She had to assume they were lurking in the treetops somewhere—but why? Why leave Crookedclaw seemingly alone and vulnerable? Was it a trap?

"Fan out," Rain muttered, low enough that Crookedclaw wouldn't hear. "Look out for the Strong Arms. I'm going in the water, in case she tries to swim for it."

Crookedclaw took a few steps back as Rain advanced slowly, stepping into the water. She didn't want to take her eyes off the monkey, but she saw through the corner of her eye that Ghost had climbed up onto a ridge of rock that ran along the bank, and Leaf was already halfway up a tree.

Tree, rock, river, Rain thought distantly. It felt right. Somehow, despite everything, they were all back where they needed to be.

"Crookedclaw," said Rain. "Listen. I understand that you want the power. It's good to have power; I'm not going to try to tell you otherwise. But you're so smart. You have to see that this—all of this—it's just not worth the trouble!"

"Let us have the stone," added Ghost. "Let us put the Dragon back together and try to fix the kingdom. Return to your troop, live wherever you like, in peace."

“Blossom and Ginseng did it,” Rain said. She splashed a little closer, and this time Crookedclaw didn’t back away. “They’re selfish and they’re mean, but they’re part of our family. The Dragon you’re holding showed me that.”

Crookedclaw looked down at the stone in her hand, a thoughtful look on her face, and Rain took the opportunity to edge closer.

“Everyone deserves a second chance,” she said.

Crookedclaw laughed, and Rain’s heart sank. She tossed the Harmony stone from hand to hand and shook her head at Rain.

“You’re right about a lot of things, Rain,” she said. “But you’re underestimating just how much I don’t *like* you. I am smart, but honestly, I’m also petty. And if I have anything to do with it, you and your precious siblings will never see this stone again.”

She turned and began to sprint away along the bank. Rain’s heart gave a jolt. She and her siblings could easily defeat Crookedclaw in a fight, but that was only if they could catch her. What if she slipped away before they could grab her? What if she got help? Rain tried to hide her panic at the thought of never recovering her stone. Crookedclaw was closing in on the trees. If they lost her again . . .

Before Rain could say a word, Ghost charged. Rain was stunned by his speed as he pounded along the rock ridge, gaining on Crookedclaw, and just before she could escape, he threw himself into a great leap, knocking into the monkey and sending both of them sprawling into the shallow water at the edge of the river.

He got to his paws first and got a grip on Crookedclaw’s arm, dragging her out of the water, and tried to throw her over onto her back. The stone glistened in her hand, but she kept a tight grip on it as she fell and then kicked Ghost in the nose, forcing him to let her go. Rain splashed toward them. The stone was wet, and it would be slippery—if they could just hit her hard enough. . . .

Ghost snapped and snarled at Crookedclaw’s heels as she tried to make for the trees again. Crookedclaw scooped up a fistful of mud in her free hand and threw it in his face—and then Leaf dropped from the branches over her head, and Crookedclaw yelped and rolled out of the way just before Leaf landed on the spot where she’d been standing. The monkey looked up at Leaf. A vicious expression crossed her face, and she dug her claws into the side of Leaf’s flank where the fur had curled in the heat.

Leaf’s jaws opened, and for a moment no sound at all escaped, and then she collapsed in on herself with a grunting roar of pain. Crookedclaw withdrew her hand. It was bloodied, and there was black-and-white singed fur clinging to the fingers.

“Leaf!” Ghost cried, and sprinted up the bank to try to grab Crookedclaw again. Rain thought of pounding after him, but a slight tug of the water at her leg made her pause. Maybe there was a better way.

Ghost got between Leaf and Crookedclaw, and he and the monkey exchanged swipes and jabs—he was too tough for her, and she was too quick for him, but that meant that he was backing her, slowly and surely, toward the river.

Rain crouched down, trying to emulate Nightwalker’s stealthy movements, and carefully positioned herself behind Crookedclaw. She took a deep, slow breath and then sprang. She knocked Crookedclaw into the mud and sank her teeth into the monkey’s leg. Crookedclaw gasped and flailed out with the hand that still held the Dragon stone, clonking Rain hard over the head with her own stone. Rain reeled, but she locked her jaw and didn’t let go.

“Give up!” she growled through Crookedclaw’s fur and the trickling blood that ran down her chin.

“Never!” said Crookedclaw. She twisted around with another flailing motion, and Rain ducked the stone, but this time Crookedclaw had moved her head to bite down on Rain’s leg. Rain let out a furious yelp.

Ghost moved in to help her hold the monkey down, and Leaf hobbled closer too, uneasy on her paws, but alive and her jaw clenched with determination.

“Strong Arms, to me!” Crookedclaw cried, and Rain looked up, expecting an ambush.

“Right here, Crookedclaw,” said a voice from the tree line. Rain peered into the branches and saw Silvermane, Jitterpaws, Toughtail, and Brightface all sitting along a tree branch, tails dangling, watching the fight.

“What are you waiting for?” cried Crookedclaw.

“To see who will win,” said Silvermane.

Crookedclaw snorted furiously. “Traitors! I *command* you to come and help me!”

But the Harmony stone did not glimmer, and the Strong Arms in the tree remained unmoved.

“The pandas are right,” said Brightface. “What *is* the point of all this?”

“Curse you!” Crookedclaw screamed. “Traitors and cowards! You swore your loyalty!”

“Loyalty born from fear isn’t really loyalty, is it?” said Ghost. He thrust a paw onto Crookedclaw’s chest.

“We’ll be taking that,” said Rain.

Crookedclaw writhed and wriggled in their grasp, cursing the pandas and the Dragon and Brawnshanks and every disloyal monkey. She tried to smack Rain with the stone again, and as she threw out her arm and Rain ducked out of the way, the stone finally slipped from her grasp. It flew into the river with a mighty splash, and sank.

“No!” Leaf gasped.

“No!” Crookedclaw screamed.

Rain looked up at Ghost. He leaned on the monkey’s chest with both paws.

“Go,” he said.

Rain turned and scrambled into the water as fast as her paws would carry her. She *thought* she knew where it had gone down, but if it was caught by the current, or buried in the underwater ferns at the bottom of the river, who knew if she would ever find it?

Rain took a deep breath and dived. Beyond the muddy bank, the river dipped sharply down. She swam up and down the bank first, checking the weeds, and she was about to come up for air before heading down into the deeper river when something splashed over her head. A shape was outlined in the water, long spindly arms and legs and a thrashing tail.

How? Rain thought, fury and confusion stealing her breath as Crookedclaw swam down past her, arms outstretched, her bleeding leg trailing red into the blue water.

There was no time to go back up for air, no time to do anything but dive. She swam with all her might, large paws pushing the water out of the way, barging straight through a shoal of glittering rainbow koi. She was gaining on Crookedclaw. The stone must be among the weeds, she realized, because the monkey was gripping on to them and using them to pull herself down deeper into the water. Her grasping hands reached out, sweeping through the rippling green.

Then the monkey’s body convulsed, and she threw her hands up to her mouth. Rain saw her take a last desperate look at the river floor and then

kick her way back to the surface, her chest hitching.

She's not a swimmer, Rain thought. *She's going to drown herself!*

The temptation to let her was strong. The urge to turn back to the weeds and find her stone and leave Crookedclaw to it vibrated inside her head. But Rain needed the breath too. So she let herself rise to the surface, and when her head had broken into the air and she'd taken a few deep gulps, she looked around for Crookedclaw and saw her splashing desperately in the stream of the river.

"Help!" the monkey gasped.

"I'll help you," Rain spluttered, swimming over. "Just tell me where—"

"Never!" cried Crookedclaw, and she brought round her claws and scratched Rain across the eyes. Rain reeled back and slipped underwater, and came up choking. *She was faking the drowning!* Her eyes stung, and instinct made her plunge them into the water before she tried to open them. Everything was red and blurry. Her nose and forehead were bleeding, but she blinked a few times, and her eyes began to clear. She could see.

And where was Crookedclaw?

Liar, thief, manipulator, until her very last breath! Rain thought. She filled her lungs and prepared to dive. *This time I'm going to drag you down to the bottom myself and leave you there. . . .*

But she was too late. Crookedclaw burst back up to the surface, bobbing and spluttering and holding the Harmony stone triumphantly over her head. She struck out for the bank, paddling with one hand.

Rain roared, and then choked again on a mouthful of river water. She threw herself forward, kicking as hard as she could.

She was gaining on Crookedclaw, until suddenly she wasn't. She felt herself being drawn back, almost as if a great paw were holding on to her. She was being pulled away from the bank. But then so was Crookedclaw. The monkey flailed around in the water to look back at Rain, a question on her lips that died as her eyes locked on the river behind Rain's shoulder. Rain managed to tread water and look back.

The river was rising. The real river, the cool, deep river that brought life, not destruction, to the Bamboo Kingdom. It seemed to swell around them, drawing them both back into the middle of the stream.

Rain held her breath and dived as the wave crested and crashed down over her head, hitting Crookedclaw square in the chest. Rain felt herself suspended in the water, watching the strange movement of the weeds and

the jittery, gleaming koi beneath the surface as the inexplicable wave broke. She saw Crookedclaw plunge down, and for a moment their eyes met, before the churning water tossed Crookedclaw's body over and over as if it weighed no more than a leaf. Still clutching the stone, she vanished into a whirlpool of bubbles and torn up weeds, and was gone.

Chapter Twenty

STEAM DRIFTED OVER THE Bamboo Kingdom, clean and pleasant after the days of ash clouds and smoke. Yet Shiver still found it eerie when she walked along the riverbank and the steam rolled in, obscured her sight for a few moments, and then rolled out again.

The water was calming now, thank the Snow Cat. When the trickle of lava had finally reached the river, she had stood well back with Nightwalker, Nimbletail, Dasher, the wolves, and the red pandas, and they had all watched as the water sizzled and bubbled up and then overwhelmed the lava, turning it back to stone—burning hot stone, sure, but not the molten death that it had been.

And then had come the wave.

The creatures were still debating whether it was the lava meeting the river that did it, or the Dragon itself rising up in anger, or something else entirely—Shiver guessed they would never know for sure. But the unnerving sight of a great wall of water traveling down the river would stay with her for a long time. As it passed, the level of the river rose—not, thankfully, to the level of the Great Flood, but enough that every stream and river in the kingdom seemed to have suddenly swelled, and the smaller creatures had to hang on to avoid being sucked into the river as it settled back down.

She'd insisted on swimming past the wet stone of the lava river, despite the hot water, to find the triplets. And she had found them, sprawled on the bank, bleeding and exhausted and soaking wet. Rain had explained what happened to Crookedclaw, and Shiver had volunteered to walk down the bank to see if she'd managed to swim ashore.

Another great cloud of steam was passing over the bank up ahead. Shiver waited for it to pass, leaving the trees and rocks glistening and shiny. And as it did so, Shiver saw the small figure sprawled in the water. She hurried over—after all, it could be a monkey she cared about—but it was Crookedclaw.

She was washing gently against the bank with the movement of the current, her eyes open and lifeless. A small wave nudged her up on shore, almost like a cub presenting Shiver with something precious it had found. And sure enough, the Harmony Dragon stone was still clutched in her hand.

Shiver wriggled the stone away from Crookedclaw's cold fingers and picked it up in her jaws.

The steam over the river parted again, and a deep pink sunset was suddenly revealed beyond the clouds. Shiver didn't know when the last time she'd seen the sunset was, but as she stood there, holding the Harmony stone, she had a strange feeling. Like it *wanted* to be seen.

I never met the real Sunset Deepwood, she thought, watching the distant clouds blazing in a sky that would be clear tonight for the first time in a long while. *But perhaps this is his way of being here. Now that the triplets can be Dragon Speakers once again.*

She shook her head. It was a fanciful idea, but something about it warmed her soggy chest as she turned back toward the pandas, leaving Crookedclaw's body to gently dislodge itself from the bank and float away down the river.

By the time she got back to the triplets, she knew they must be feeling better, because they'd found a stand of bamboo and were feasting as if they hadn't eaten in days—which perhaps they hadn't.

"Shiver!" Rain gasped, standing up quickly. "Is that . . . ?"

Shiver walked up to her and reverently laid the stone on the ground at Rain's feet.

"The Harmony stone," she said. "It's an honor to be able to return it to you, Speaker."

Rain took a deep breath. She reached out a paw and placed it carefully and solemnly on top of Shiver's head.

Then she drew it back and head-butted Shiver affectionately in the chest so hard that Shiver almost fell over backward.

"Thank you!" she cried. "I thought it was gone forever!"

"At last," said Leaf, getting up with a grunt and a wince. "The stones are reunited."

"And so are we," said Ghost, and he ran up to Shiver, and this time she really was bowled over by the strength of his jaw as he rubbed it against her cheek. Rain gave a playful hop, and for a moment Shiver thought that they could be any other littermates, playing together outside their mother's den.

Then Rain sat up and choked back her laughter, then looked at Shiver with a curious glare. “So,” she said, “what’s all this about gathering animals to heal the Dragon?”

They walked Rain back to the Egg Rocks after Shiver explained everything the gibbons had told the pangolins about what must be done. The gibbons had done an amazing job gathering creatures, and the banks of the river were already crowded with animals when they got there. Rain was almost mobbed by the Prosperhill pandas, led by Peony with little Fir and Frog not far behind. And when Rain had disentangled herself from them with promises that she was fine and not hurt, Shiver gave the triplets a little space so that they could say goodbye.

“See you soon . . . ?” Rain said.

“I guess we’ll find out,” said Leaf.

“And if we don’t see each other through”—Ghost waggled his ears—“the mysteries of communing with the Great Dragon, then . . . back here, once a month, like we agreed?”

“Sounds good,” said Rain.

“Just don’t be late this time,” said Leaf.

Rain took a deep breath. “Nah, you know I can’t promise that. But I will do my best. I swear.”

Shiver watched as they rubbed their faces together one more time; then she followed Ghost and Leaf as they walked into the Northern Forest, leaving Rain by the riverside, surrounded by family, watching them go.

Leaf traveled with Shiver and Ghost a little way, Dasher by her side. Skull Hill was on the other side of the Broken Forest, and none of them wanted to cross directly through it—if it was even possible. The rising of the river had flooded the smaller streams, and some of them had met the lava flows, and all any creature knew for certain was that there was now a great mist lying on the Broken Forest, and the glow from the lake of rock at its center seemed to dim every night. One of the pangolins had told Shiver he thought it was haunted now. Shiver had pretended not to believe him, but she thought it extremely plausible.

Leaf and Dasher left them just before they began the ascent to the mountains in earnest. It was High Sun, and Ghost and Leaf wandered off together to eat their feast—what they said to each other, Shiver never knew.

She sat with Dasher on the twisted trunk of a pine tree, looking out over the mists of the Northern Kingdom.

“Do you think we’ll really have peace now?” asked Dasher.

Shiver thought about it for a moment. “I think we’ll have troubles over territory, and which predators can hunt which prey, and whether every panda is getting their share of the bamboo. I think we’ll have as much peace as any creature can have in this life. But I do think our troubles will be smaller from now on. And definitely more mundane.”

“I certainly hope so,” said Dasher through a mouthful of some fruit he had found along the way. “I wouldn’t want to say this to Leaf, but if I never actually see the Dragon itself again in my life, I think I’ll die happy. It’s incredible; it’s wonderful. And I think I’ve had enough for one lifetime.”

Shiver thought of Winter’s spirit.

“I don’t think I agree,” she said softly.

Shiver and Ghost were walking along a rocky ridge, still some way below the snow line, when they heard a voice calling across the empty space.

“Awa, oha! Speaker Ghost is here!”

Shiver couldn’t help smiling as she looked around for the gibbon who’d called them, but her muzzle fell open as she saw it. The gibbon was Quiet herself, and she was approaching them from higher up the ridge, accompanied by what looked like hundreds of animals. There were massive oxen and tiny pikas, mountain foxes, wolves, rabbits, eagles, sheep and goats, sables, a couple of mountain cats, and a leopard—not a snow leopard, but a leopard whose fur was pale yellow and thinner than Shiver’s. There was even a new kind of bear: a huge, lumbering black-furred beast. All the animals were excited to see Ghost, but the bear greeted him with particular, exaggerated politeness.

Quiet and her charges fell in line behind Ghost and Shiver as they made their way higher into the mountains. There were already quite enough of them, and yet as they walked they were joined by even more. The sun bears came to meet them, and the golden takins, and riding on the backs of the takins was a colony of tiny mountain weasels with bright red fur and bright white bellies. More and more of the creatures of the north joined them as they walked, until Shiver could hardly believe that the kingdom had ever been home to so many animals.

Ghost walked proudly at the head of the cacophony, talking to any creature who wanted to talk, giving advice or asking for more time to think over their question. Shiver felt warm right down to the end of her tail as she watched him confidently explain his thoughts to one animal and then another. If he was surprised that they would come to him, he didn't show it.

They finally met Snowstorm and Frost, and the blue sheep, in front of the Dragon's Claw. They were beaming with pride, and they deserved to be—the Claw had been put back not just to how it was when Ghost had found it, but to the way it might have been when it was first formed.

Ghost ran over to their littermates and gave them both an affectionate licking that bowled them over in the snow. They got up, laughing and shaking out their fur, as the parade of animals started to fan out over the snowfield and find places to rest and, for the less hardy of them, to keep warm.

The time came quickly. Ghost went into the den below the Claw, and when he came back out again, he looked shaken, but strangely not in a bad way.

"It's happening soon," he said. "Tonight. We're finally going to heal the Dragon, and the kingdom. I am. *Me*," he added, with a nervous laugh. "Ghost Born of Winter, the panda who thinks he's a leopard!"

"You can do it," Snowstorm said firmly.

"I know I can," said Ghost. He looked around at his littermates. "But you know that I wouldn't be here if it weren't for all of you, don't you? If it weren't for the kindness that Winter showed me when I was a lost cub, or the way you treated me like a littermate even when I made it hard for you . . . and, most especially, I wouldn't be here if not for Shiver."

Shiver startled a little, not having expected him to name her so specifically. To her greater surprise, Snowstorm and Frost were both nodding, and they both seemed perfectly sincere.

"You stuck with me when nobody else did," Ghost said. "You never laughed at me, or felt ashamed of me, or made me feel like I didn't fit in my own skin. I'm so glad I get to live here in the mountains and share everything that comes next with all of you."

"*Awwww,*" said Snowstorm. "Stop—you're too good. Haven't you got a Dragon to fix?" She bustled off, muttering something about moving the sheep from grazing on the earthen top of the Claw. Frost winked at Ghost and followed her, leaving him alone with Shiver.

“You know,” said Ghost, “Snowstorm inherited Winter’s hunting skills, and Frost got her nose for sensing prey. But you . . . you have our mother’s heart.”

Chapter Twenty-One

"EVEN IF IT'S NOT a *full third* of all the creatures in the kingdom," Dasher said, leaning his head on his paws, "it's got to be really close, right?"

He was lying on his front, staring down over the brow bone of Skull Hill at the assembled animals. Herds, bands, troops, clans, flocks—if they lived in the Northern Forest, they had come to Skull Hill, or at least had sent some of their young and energetic relatives.

Leaf was lying sprawled on her back on the top of Skull Hill, staring at the stars. The night sky was clear and bright, and the temperature had fallen sharply in the last day or two. The previous night, there had been almost no light visible through the mist of the Broken Forest at all.

She sat up, looked down at the view of the Northern Forest, and sighed.

"I wish the pangolins hadn't given us their message about this place at such a bad time," she said. "It's beautiful up here. If I'd known what the real purpose of it all was . . ."

"There's no point going through everything that's happened looking for ways we could have done it better," Dasher declared with absolute certainty. "You'll drive yourself bee-brained doing that."

"You're right." Leaf gave Dasher a small lick on the top of his head. "Come on. Let's find out what exactly is supposed to . . ."

She fell silent.

The moment she stood and looked out from Skull Hill, she felt a tugging at the back of her mind, like the twitching of a spider's web when a fly moved its wings. She felt a presence. She felt two. One was to the south, and it felt like the gentle splash of water and the taste of bamboo and the feeling of being right. The other, to the north, felt like crunchy frost and smelled like pine and sheep.

"Oh," she said, under her breath.

Weird! The feeling from the south didn't speak, exactly; Leaf couldn't *hear* words. She just got the very strong feeling that Rain was looking her way, experiencing the same tug and the same connection, and that her reaction was, *This is weird!*

Is it time? Ghost's response was calmer and clearer, but Leaf could still feel his nerves.

"It must be," she said aloud. "Are you ready?"

Ready, said Ghost.

Ready or not, said Rain.

"I'm ready," said Leaf. She wondered if either of her siblings could hear the shake in her voice.

She held her Speaker stone high in the air. Again she felt a pulling sensation, as if someone had tied her paws to Ghost's and Rain's, so that whatever they did, across the wide expanse of the kingdom, they somehow did it together.

Leaf had just the right amount of time to wonder how the Dragon would know that they were all here and waiting, and then her stone flashed and turned black.

"Creatures of the Northern Forest," Dasher announced quickly. "Gather and lend your presence to Dragon Speaker Leaf!"

Leaf gave a grateful smile, but she couldn't look at Dasher—her eyes were fixed on the stone, which suddenly felt strangely light in her grip, as if she could take her paw away and leave the stone hanging in the air. It turned cool, then cold, and then she felt her arm shaking as the stone vibrated in her grip. And then, in the starlight, the black surface of the stone seemed to split. Bright summer green flashed through cracks in the blackness. Like smoke, or like blood in the water, the black color began to peel from the stone and flow up into the air, curling and coiling, until Leaf realized she was seeing a familiar shape—a long, sinuous body with flashing scales against a blackness that was darker than the night sky.

Beside her, Dasher caught his breath, and a moment later the rest of the animals assembled below began to chatter and point, turning their faces upward.

They could all see it too. The Dark Dragon was leaving Leaf's stone. It floated up and out, over the kingdom, twisting and flowing like a shadow flickering under a tree.

Leaf blinked, feeling a flush of vertigo as her perspective shifted. Had the Dragon really grown to such a massive size all at once? It hung suddenly over the Broken Forest now, as large as a mountain, drifting lazily over the misty land below. Leaf reached out to it in her mind, and what she felt was . . . contentment.

Then she felt a shock and a gasp that was not her own, but came from Ghost at the Dragon's Claw. A moment later a flash of lightning seemed to split the sky, and the animals at Skull Hill yelped in fright—but this was no lightning, at least not the kind that would strike the ground and set the forest alight. The crackling, jagged ball of light spun out over the Broken Forest to join the Dark Dragon, and Leaf knew she was looking at the Light Dragon. It danced around the Dark Dragon, sparking with light and buzzing with energy. It shone down over the whole kingdom, and somehow the Dark Dragon looked even darker, calmer, more sedate in comparison.

All of a sudden, Leaf was thinking about her aunt Plum. It came almost out of nowhere, as if drawn out of her: a thin thread of grief that she carried with her always. Aunt Plum would have fainted away to see the Dragons out in the world like this, and Leaf felt as if that thought was carried away from her, toward the Dragons themselves.

Orchid would have been so proud, Leaf thought, and she felt as if another layer of grief and pain had been lifted from her spirit and carried into the sky. *And Root. I never knew a thing about Root. . . . Shadowhunter would be proud of Nightwalker, and he'd know that we did our best. . . . The red pandas should be here, but Brisk and Sleet should be too. . . .*

Ghost was thinking of Winter, and Rain was thinking of Pebble. Leaf couldn't see their grief being drawn from them, but she was sure it was.

The animals from their past were never completely gone. They were in the stars, in the air that they breathed. Because the Dragon remembered. The Dragon would always remember. So their hearts could be lighter, because the Dragon carried their grief when they could not. . . .

She swallowed, trying to figure out how she could explain this to the gathered animals—but then she realized that every one of them was staring into the sky with the same awestruck expression of mingled grief and comfort.

The Dark and Light Dragons swirled and danced together, and Leaf thought she could have watched them forever.

"Once, there were just these two," she murmured. "The monkeys tried to ruin them by having them merge—but that's how we got the Great Dragon. I think they actually made things . . . better."

Brawnshanks tried to ruin them by splitting them, said Ghost. *And now there are three. . . .*

Here it comes! said Rain.

The Harmony Dragon was beautiful and strange to look at, hard to see and impossible to look away from. Its scales were either water or diamond, sparkling in the dark, flowing like the Dark Dragon over the treetops, and sparking with energy like the Light Dragon. Leaf caught her breath as the three Dragons danced together, faster and faster, swirling around and around until they formed a shimmering shape, the Dark Dragon twisting and curling on one side, the Light on the other, and the Harmony Dragon between the two, linking and separating them at the same time.

The Dark Dragon opened an eye, and it was a perfect sphere of sparkling white. The Light Dragon curled itself in against the Dark, and its eye was a void of blackness deeper than the space between the stars.

The kingdom needs both Light and Dark, Leaf thought.

"Without Light and Dark," Dasher whispered, echoing her thoughts, "there is no Harmony."

And then the Dragons merged. Bursts of rainbow light, crackling energy, and deep darkness spread across the sky, and the creatures below gasped as one. . . .

And then Leaf was standing alone on a featureless plain, looking up into a starless sky.

No, not alone. Ghost was beside her on one paw, and Rain on the other. She wondered if this was real, if all three of them would remember this the same way.

And then, out of the air, just as it had appeared when they had met it in the Dragon Mountain, a great shape began to form.

Its scales had been blazing red and gold, but now they were the regal blue of a bright summer sky, its drifting fur and the fins along its back the color of grass on a perfect morning.

It turned its huge head to look down at them and blinked its eyes—one black, one white—in greeting, and affection, and thanks. The bright blue coils draped all around the pandas until they blocked out all light, and then Leaf opened her eyes and found she was back on Skull Hill. She had fallen onto her haunches.

She looked down into her stone—green once more, the green of perfect grass and deep jungle shadows.

The kingdom lay before her, the creatures chattering excitedly over what had just happened. As she watched, the wind picked up, and the mist

over the Broken Forest blew away to reveal no sign of fire or ash. The forest was shrouded in darkness, pure and quiet and wonderful.

Epilogue

“SPEAKER GHOST, HAVE YOU got a minute?” said a voice. Ghost was right in the middle of climbing down over a short cliff, and he paused with one leg dangling to look up and see who needed his attention.

It was a wolf, the same one who had nearly eaten Leaf. She was standing on the top of the cliff, her pack behind her. They all looked glossy-furred and bright-eyed—better fed than he had ever seen them. The wolf leader bowed respectfully to him.

“Well, I don’t see why not,” Ghost said. He clambered back up onto flat ground and shook himself. “I need to be on my way soon, but I can spare a few moments. How can I help you?”

“My pack is going home at last,” she said. “It’s been a long year, but we’re finally strong enough to make the journey over the mountains. I just wanted to say thank you. And, er, to ask you to give our thanks once more to Leaf. If it hadn’t been for her mercy and her quick thinking, we could have been responsible for the doom of the kingdom. . . .”

The wolf took on a slightly haunted look, and Ghost sighed and raised a paw. He rested it gently on the leader’s neck.

“I know how that feels,” he said. “I know how it feels to know you almost did something terrible. You didn’t ask for my advice, but here it is: Put it behind you, just like you put the peaks of the mountains behind you when you cross over.”

The wolf nodded.

“Good luck on your journey, Speaker Ghost,” she said.

“Thank you,” said Ghost. He stood and watched as the wolves turned and walked away, until they were out of sight. Then he went back to taking his undignified shortcut.

The journey to the meeting place was long, but by now it was so familiar that Ghost could almost have walked it in his sleep. He passed from snow to rock to bamboo, enjoying the fresh smells of new growth as he stepped into the Northern Forest. He wasn’t quite used to the lush greenery that had sprung up there along with the lake and the river.

Everywhere there had once been molten rock, there was now water. The whole Northern Forest was crisscrossed with little streams and wider rivers, all of them running over a bed of hard black rock. The lake was particularly wonderful to sit by on a warm day, almost shallow enough for a panda to stand up straight and not have his head underwater, and so reflective that at night it looked as if a hole had opened through the earth and you could look down at another world's stars. Tonight, the reflection of the full moon would seem so solid, you could imagine using it as a stepping-stone. . . .

"Ghost!" cried another voice. Ghost turned, a wide grin on his face.

"Leaf!" he said.

He greeted his sister with head-butts and nuzzles, and told her about the wolf's message. Leaf winced.

"Did you at least tell her not to dwell—"

"Of course," said Ghost.

They walked together in companionable silence, across the little streams and into the part of the forest where the splintered and broken trees and the ash-infused ground grew thick with mosses of all kinds and colors, and red flowers with wavering petals that looked like flames grew up around the roots of the trees. Nobody called it the Broken Forest anymore.

At dusk Ghost and Leaf crested a hill and looked down on the Lake of Stars. It was just as beautiful and as startling as always. In the center, a flat spit of land with a hill at one end emerged from the water—the island where the triplets had once been trapped, now bursting with plant life. A young maple tree had taken root on the top of the hill, and on the flat you could hardly move for bamboo—the tastiest that grew anywhere in the kingdom.

"Do you think she'll be late again?" Ghost chuckled as the two of them approached the stepping-stones that would take them across the shallowest part of the lake.

"Do you think your mother was a monkey?" came the reply. Rain was sitting at the edge of the water. She looked deeply smug, and deeply happy. "Hurry up, you two," she said. "It's time for the first feast of the new moon! I won't save you any, you know."

Laughing, Ghost and Leaf mobbed her and almost knocked her backward into the water. They crossed the stepping-stones together.

"They're here!" called a voice, and Ghost looked up and waved. Waiting for them on the island, the other pandas raised their voices in greeting or waved their paws. The Prosperhills, the Slenderwoods, the

Hollowtrees, and so many others, welcoming their Dragon Speakers to the feast.

About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling Warriors, Seekers, Survivors, and Bravelands series.

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